

PD SHORT STORIES – MARCH 2018



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THE FALSE RHYME

From: Project Gutenberg's *Tales and Stories*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

“Come, tell me where the maid is found
Whose heart can love without deceit,
And I will range the world around
To sigh one moment at her feet.”
—MOORE.

ON a fine July day, the fair Margaret, Queen of Navarre, then on a visit to her royal brother, had arranged a rural feast for the morning following, which Francis declined attending. He was melancholy; and the cause was said to be some lover's quarrel with a favourite dame. The morrow came, and dark rain and murky clouds destroyed at once the schemes of the courtly throng. Margaret was angry, and she grew weary: her only hope for amusement was in Francis, and he had shut himself up,—an excellent reason why she should the more desire to see him. She entered his apartment: he was standing at the casement, against which the noisy shower beat, writing with a diamond on the glass. Two beautiful dogs were his sole companions. As Queen Margaret entered, he hastily let down the silken curtain before the window, and looked a little confused.

“What treason is this, my liege,” said the queen, “which crimsons your cheek? I must see the same.”

“It is treason,” replied the king, “and therefore, sweet sister, thou mayest not see it.”

This the more excited Margaret's curiosity, and a playful contest ensued. Francis at last yielded: he threw himself on a huge high-backed settee; and as the lady drew back the curtain with an arch smile, he grew grave and sentimental, as he reflected on the cause which had inspired his libel against all womankind.

“What have we here?” cried Margaret; “nay, this is lèse majesté—

“Souvent femme varie,
Bien fou qui s'y fie!”

Very little change would greatly amend your couplet:—would it not run better thus—

“Souvent homme varie,
Bien folle qui s’y fie?”

I could tell you twenty stories of man’s inconstancy.”

“I will be content with one true tale of woman’s fidelity,” said Francis drily; “but do not provoke me. I would fain be at peace with the soft Mutabilities, for thy dear sake.”

“I defy your grace,” replied Margaret rashly, “to instance the falsehood of one noble and well-reputed dame.”

“Not even Emilie de Lagny?” asked the king.

This was a sore subject for the queen. Emilie had been brought up in her own household, the most beautiful and the most virtuous of her maids of honour. She had long loved the Sire de Lagny, and their nuptials were celebrated with rejoicings but little ominous of the result. De Lagny was accused but a year after of traitorously yielding to the emperor a fortress under his command, and he was condemned to perpetual imprisonment. For some time Emilie seemed inconsolable, often visiting the miserable dungeon of her husband, and suffering on her return, from witnessing his wretchedness, such paroxysms of grief as threatened her life. Suddenly, in the midst of her sorrow, she disappeared; and inquiry only divulged the disgraceful fact, that she had escaped from France, bearing her jewels with her, and accompanied by her page, Robinet Leroux. It was whispered that, during their journey, the lady and the stripling often occupied one chamber; and Margaret, enraged at these discoveries, commanded that no further quest should be made for her lost favourite.

Taunted now by her brother, she defended Emilie, declaring that she believed her to be guiltless, even going so far as to boast that within a month she would bring proof of her innocence.

“Robinet was a pretty boy,” said Francis, laughing.

“Let us make a bet,” cried Margaret: “if I lose, I will bear this vile rhyme of thine as a motto to my shame to my grave; if I win”—

“I will break my window, and grant thee whatever boon thou askest.”

The result of this bet was long sung by troubadour and minstrel. The queen employed a hundred emissaries,—published rewards for any intelligence of Emilie,—all in vain. The month was expiring, and Margaret would have given many bright jewels to redeem her word. On the eve of the fatal day, the jailor of the prison in which the Sire de Lagny was confined sought an audience of the queen; he brought her a message from the knight to say, that if the Lady Margaret would ask his pardon as her boon, and obtain from her royal brother that he might be brought before him, her bet was won. Fair Margaret was very joyful, and readily made the desired promise. Francis was unwilling to see his false servant, but he was in high good-humour, for a cavalier had that morning brought intelligence of a victory over the Imperialists. The messenger himself was lauded in the despatches as the most fearless and bravest knight in France. The king loaded him with presents, only regretting that a vow prevented the soldier from raising his visor or declaring his name.

That same evening as the setting sun shone on the lattice on which the ungallant rhyme was traced, Francis reposed on the same settee, and the beautiful Queen of Navarre, with triumph in her bright eyes, sat beside him. Attended by guards, the prisoner was brought in: his frame was attenuated by privation, and he walked with tottering steps. He knelt at the feet of Francis, and uncovered his head; a quantity of rich golden hair then escaping, fell over the sunken cheeks and pallid brow of the suppliant.

“We have treason here!” cried the king. “Sir jailor, where is your prisoner!”

“Sire, blame him not,” said the soft faltering voice of Emilie; “wiser men than he have been deceived by woman. My dear lord was guiltless of the crime for which he suffered. There was but one mode to save him:—I assumed his chains—he escaped with poor Robinet Leroux in my attire—he joined your army: the young and gallant cavalier who delivered the

despatches to your grace, whom you overwhelmed with honours and reward, is my own Enguerrard de Lagny. I waited but for his arrival with testimonials of his innocence, to declare myself to my lady, the queen. Has she not won her bet! And the boon she asks”—

“Is de Lagny’s pardon,” said Margaret, as she also knelt to the king. “Spare your faithful vassal, sire, and reward this lady’s truth.”

Francis first broke the false-speaking window, then he raised the ladies from their supplicatory posture.

In the tournament given to celebrate this “Triumph of Ladies,” the Sire de Lagny bore off every prize; and surely there was more loveliness in Emilie’s faded cheek—more grace in her emaciated form, type as they were of truest affection—than in the prouder bearing and fresher complexion of the most brilliant beauty in attendance on the courtly festival.



PROFESSOR NO NO

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Wild Justice: Stories of the South Seas*, by Lloyd Osbourne

It was years ago that he came to Uvea (said little Nofo, as we sat side by side on a derelict spar and watched the sun go down into the lagoon)—years and years and years ago, when I was an unthinking child and knew naught of men nor their crooked hearts. He was a chief, of wild and strange appearance, with a black beard half covering his piglike face; a thin, bent, elderly chief, with hairy hands, and a head on which there was nothing at all, and teeth so loose in his mouth that at night he laid them in a cup beside him. He was landed from a ship that forthwith sailed and was never seen again—he and three tents, and a boat and innumerable boxes, all numbered from one to a thousand, and a nigger named Billy Hindoo to care for him and cook.

The Government gave him a piece of land next the lagoon, where he pitched his tents and lived; and they put a taboo round the land so that none might cross, and also a notice on a board, saying, "Be careful of the white man." Here he unpacked his things, and arranged a place for Billy Hindoo, and another place, open at the sides, where at a table he was daily served with sardines and bottled beer. He was named Professor, and his occupation, unlike that of all other white men, was to look at dead fish through bits of glass. He was a man of no kindness nor accomplishments, meanly solitary, and, in spite of two pairs of spectacles worn the one on the other, he was almost blind besides. Were you to come near him, he would scream out, "No, no!" Were you even to touch his bits of glass, or finger his sticky shadow pictures in the pool, he would run at you, crying, "No, no!" Were you to approach him as he bathed in the lagoon, marveling at his unsightliness, he would beat the water like one delirious, and scream again, "No, no!" So, in time, his name became changed from Professor into No No, or, as many called him in one word, Professor No No; and we all grew to hate him, as did also Billy Hindoo, who was generous and loving, and gave away unstintedly sardines and biscuit to those he favored.

But Professor No No, unexpectedly returning in his boat with a new dead fish no bigger than that (a fish, too, of so little worth that one couldn't eat it without feeling ill for the succeeding week), discovered Billy Hindoo dividing a tin of biscuit among the girls with whom he had made friends. The rage of Professor No No was without limit, and he ran at Billy Hindoo and choked him with his hairy hands, and beat him over the body with a stick, and drove him away with execrations. Then he sat down at the table and drank bottled beer, and held up the fish to his blind eyes, and at intervals shouted out, "No, no; No, no," as we all crowded about the taboo line, watching and wondering.

The next day Billy Hindoo came back, but Professor No No repelled him with a stick, having counted the beer and the sardines and the biscuit, and found many missing. Then Billy Hindoo sought a place in the house of Tamua, and being a man of subtle mind, though without paper on which to write, carved the date of his rejection on a tree, together with the names of witnesses who had seen him struck. He would fain have brought suit against his master before the ancients, but they were afraid of men-of-war, and thought it ill to interfere. But the anger of Billy Hindoo surpassed that of a woman whose man has cast her off; and,

baffled in one direction, he redoubled his efforts in another, telling tales about Professor No No that made the strongest shudder to hear them; how, indeed, he was Antichrist, and that his coming to Uvea had been foretold in Revelations. Whether this was true or false, it was evident that Professor No No believed not in God; for it was seen he went never to church, and remembered (when strangers asked him if he were a missionary) that he would grow beside himself and roar, "No, no!" snorting like a suffocating person.

Now there lived in the village a chief named Malamalama, a young man who owned a fine house and much land, and was withal so handsome and gay that there was scarce a woman but whose eyes shone at the sight of him. And Malamalama's wife was named Salesa, and the strange thing about Salesa was that she was white. Her father had been a _papalangi_, and her mother (who came from another island to the southward) a half-white; and Salesa, the child of the two, was fairer than either, and a girl, besides, of wonderful beauty. It was this that found her favor in Malamalama's sight, for she was without family, and what Kanaka blood she possessed was that of slaves; but the chief must needs have his way, being a man of imperious temper and willful under advice; and so the little out-islander was married to him and elevated to the rank of chieftainess.

Then her arrogance and pride, previously concealed by the humbleness of her station, broke out with the fierceness of consuming flames. Were you to pass her on the road and say, "_Talofa, Salesa_," she often deigned not to return your greeting; and when people came to her house she did not like, she would say to them, "Go away," like that, so that everyone was insulted and retired with darkened faces. Of course, she was not utterly without friends, women of contemptible spirit who fawned on her like dogs, saying, "Lo, is she not beautiful?" But they were only a handful, and by degrees grew less and less, for she was as mean with her property as Professor No No, and made the most trifling returns for pigs or costly presents. So in time she was left alone in her fine house, and though she had a sewing machine and a musical box, and goldfish in a glass jar, and an umbrella with a glittering handle, she spent her days in yawning, and her nights in telling Malamalama what a fool she had been to marry him.

After the manner of men, Malamalama's love increased in the proportion

of her disdain, and there was nothing he would not do to try and please her. He took her on board every succeeding ship, and remained for hours in the trade room while she spent the price of many tons of copra and pearl shell in filling a chest with purchases, saying, in her presumptuous way, "Give me twenty fathoms of this; give me forty fathoms of the other. This silk is good, lo! I will take a bolt." And Malamalama, who perhaps wanted an anchor for his boat, or a little, tiny, trifling pea-soupo of paint, had perforce to do without either, and paddle ashore again, poorer, indeed, than many of his serfs and dependents.

On these occasions also Salesa showed a lawless deportment among the whites that put her good name in jeopardy and caused many to wonder and gossip. She would sit at the cabin table and drink beer and eat sardines, saying saucily, "Me white mans, too," as she joked and laughed with the captains and supercargoes. Or, if some one put his head down the hatchway, she would call out, "Oh, the Kanaka dog! Go 'way, you peeping Kanaka dog!" Whereat the whites would slap her on the back, and it was said they even placed her on their knees and kissed her. Be that true or false, Malamalama grew to hate the sight of a ship; and sometimes, when he and Salesa went on board together, he showed her a sharp knife, and said, "Be careful, you wicked white woman, or I shall kill you."

She was as changeable as a little child, and had humors, too, of tenderness and contrition, when she would put her arms round her husband's neck and be-darling him, saying, "I love you! I love you!" and bemoan her contrariness and the fact that she was white. For though she was born and bred with us, she felt she was not of our race; and sometimes she would say to Malamalama when he reproached her, "Sell me to one of the captains for a whaleboat and let me go." But Malamalama only loved her the more, and his handsome face grew sullen and angry as he threatened again to kill her if she misbehaved.

Now when Professor No No came to live with us on the lagoon, Salesa was beside herself with curiosity, and heaped presents on Billy Hindoo in order to learn about his master. But Billy Hindoo knew nothing but his own stutter, and though he took the presents and came constantly to Salesa's house, very little in the way of information was accomplished. At last, greatly daring, Salesa arrayed herself in her finest clothes,

and with servants carrying gifts of pigs and chickens, went down to the lagoon to pay a visit to the stranger. She found Professor No No sitting at his table, looking at dead fish through bits of glass, and he never turned round as the party halted at the taboo line and coughed deprecatorily in order to attract his attention. Then Salesa, who feared neither devil nor man, took the baskets in her arms and stepped across the taboo, saying in a voice of sweetness, "Professor No No! Professor No No!"

He sprang from the table and rushed at her, waving his arms, and screaming as was his wont, "No, no! No, no!" while she, overcome with terror, dropped the gifts and fled like a sea mew on the wings of the wind. That night all Uvea joked about her discomfiture, while she sat in her house and cried, and Billy Hindoo was invited everywhere to tell the story in the antics that served him in the place of a tongue. But once Salesa had set her heart on a thing she never faltered nor turned aside; and though she waited and waited, it was not as one conquered or resigned. When the quarrel came between Billy Hindoo and his master, she saw the means, in Professor No No's desolation and abandonment, of obtaining the satisfaction of her purpose. For the white man, thus left to himself, grew increasingly dirty and uncared for; and his camp, once so clean under the care of Billy Hindoo, became as a pigsty of empty cans and bottles. Nothing therein was washed, and the savor of Professor No No and his camp blew noisomely across the taboo line as one walked to leeward.

One day, after spying out that he had already sailed out for more fish to look at through bits of glass, Salesa crept into the settlement and began to make it clean again. She carried away all the tins and bottles; she swept the disordered grass; she entered the professor's tent, filling his water-bottles, making his bed and decorating it with flowers and *_laumaile_*. Then, as she had so often watched Billy Hindoo from a distance, she spread the table with a clean cloth, and on it she placed a bottle of beer and a tin of sardines under a wire netting and three ship's biscuits in a row. Then she went back and hid in the undergrowth, waiting and waiting, like a warrior in an ambush.

But Professor No No made no sign as he landed from his boat, nor did he seem to perceive that anything unusual had taken place in the time he had been gone. He drank the bottle of beer and ate the sardines and

biscuit, never troubling himself whence they had come; and while Salesa waited and waited with a suffocating heart, he looked at dead fish through bits of glass. But day by day she returned to his camp with the assiduity of a mother to her nursing child; and by degrees growing bolder with custom, she no longer watched until Professor No No had departed, but moved here and there about his land, secure by reason of his blindness and preoccupation. Like a wild animal to whom one approaches with gentleness and precaution, thus it was with Professor No No in the hands of Salesa. First he saw her only at a distance as she cleaned and swept; then a little closer as she spread his table and laid out his bottle of beer and the sardines and biscuit; then it came about that she even touched him with impunity, and sat beside him in a chair as he continued to look at dead fish through bits of glass. At last she dared to speak, telling him softly the names of the dead fish, which he wrote down in a little book, and informing him also that her name was Salesa, and that she loved him.

And she, so defiant and proud, became as another person; so that she was kind not only to Professor No No, but to others whom she had previously treated with contumely. She carried the white man's packages when he went abroad, his photograph box and all manner of apparatus and tools, and the bottle of beer and the sardines for his well-being, never heeding the sun nor the fiery sand. She sat with him daily in his boat, baiting his hooks and catching fish likewise, and grew wise also in looking at them through bits of glass, so that he no longer ran at her and cried, "No, no!" when she touched his things. On the contrary, her wisdom increased in such matters, becoming in time even as his own, so that she also took photographs, and hammered off pieces of coral from the reef, and grew excited over little, common, worthless fish that stung you if you touched them.

It is not to be supposed that Malamalama watched with any equanimity this increasing friendship between Professor No No and his wife, or that the constant tale of scandal and evil-doing fell on heedless ears. He beat Salesa repeatedly with a stick, and she bit him in return all over his beautiful body; and their fine house, once the envy of all Uvea, reechoed distressfully with screams and blows. But the madness of a woman for a man is not thus to be set aside, and the more Malamalama beat her with a stick, the more ardent grew her love for Professor No No; and when he talked with her and argued, she would answer unabashed

that whites were whites and Kanakas were Kanakas, and that it was ill to mix the oil and water of the races.

"But he is overgrown with hair like a dog," said Malamalama, "except on his head, which glistens like a sting ray in the sun, and he is altogether hideous and frightening. It is not reasonable that anyone should prefer him to me."

"But there is that in his head which makes him beautiful," said Salesa.

"Lo! I have things in my head also," said Malamalama, "and I pass my life, besides, like a man, diving for shell, and cutting copra on my property, and attending to the affairs of the church where I am deacon, and finding everywhere a better employment than that of looking at dead fish through bits of glass."

"Malamalama," said Salesa, "divorce me and let me go, and take thy choice of all the maids of Uvea in my stead. Professor No No loves me not, but I am his bondslave in love, and care for no other man but him."

Now this was very good advice, and the chief would have done well to follow it. But there is in men a pride about their women that blinds their eyes to sense, and Malamalama, instead of heeding, grew, on the contrary, morose and willful. He listened more greedily than ever to Billy Hindoo, and to the tales the nigger brought him constantly of Salesa's misdoing; for Billy Hindoo was crazed with anger against his master, and against the woman who had so successfully supplanted him, and was eager to revenge himself on both. And one day he brought not only a new tale, but a bottle of gin he had managed to pilfer from the camp of Professor No No.

Malamalama began to drink the gin, and the more he drank the more he began to feel the aching of his spirit. He stopped the passers-by and told them of his wrongs; he rolled over in the road, so that he was all dirty, calling out curses on his wife and Professor No No. He cried and cried, and staggered about and shouted, and rushed hither and thither, exclaiming, "I will kill them! I will kill them!" And all the while he drank of the gin with an increasing fury, so that he went at last and got his rifle and four boxes of cartridges and walked unsteadily toward the lagoon, weeping and laughing and beating the air with his loaded

gun. And I, then only a little child, followed him at a distance, wondering and mocking with the others.

Now on this occasion it happened that Salesa was away in the boat, and Professor No No, all alone, was sitting at his table and looking at dead fish through bits of glass. Malamalama stopped at the taboo line, not daring to cross it, and withheld, besides, by the notice on the tree; and he was so tipsy with the gin that he could barely shout, nor hold the gun up to his shoulder. But he fired, as straight as he could, in the direction of Professor No No, and shattered a glass barrel of dead fish at his elbow. Professor No No leaped in the air, so that at first we thought, erroneously, that he had been hurt; and he ran this way and that, dodging the bullets from Malamalama's gun. He seemed to believe that the taboo gave him protection, for, instead of bolting into the undergrowth, he raced around and around in a circle, and then inside this tent and that, so that it was laughable to watch him popping in and out like a terrified rat. And Malamalama, so overcome with gin that he could barely see, fired and fired and fired from the four boxes of his cartridges. Then, when all was finished, he rose and went home, while the children crowded the line and shouted, "Professor No No, art thou dead?"

That night there was a meeting of the ancients in the speak-house, and all the culprits were there under guard to receive a judgment. Malamalama was fined one dollar for being drunk and fifteen dollars for firing unwarrantably at Professor No No; and Professor No No was fined fifteen dollars for having won Salesa from her husband; and Billy Hindoo was fined fifteen dollars for having given the gin to Malamalama and for the mischief he had caused with his lying tongue; and Salesa was surrendered to the matrons of the village to receive a lashing for her misconduct. Then Tanielu, the pastor, prayed that God's wrath might be averted from so wicked a village, and made a beautiful parable about the Garden of Eden and the serpent.

One might have thought that this would have healed the matter, and that a punishment so nearly equal would have been submitted to with humility and grace. But, on the contrary, the quarrel went from bad to worse, so that Tanielu, the pastor, would say sorrowfully from the pulpit that Uvea was like another hell, but with four devils instead of one. Malamalama, once a pillar of the church, was degraded from the rank of

deacon and expelled, becoming speedily dissolute and abandoned, opening his house for forbidden dances, and taking new wives in shameless succession; and Salesa, her pretty body red with stripes, found no consolation whatever in her white darling, who ran at her repellingly, shouting "No, no!" like a lion; and Billy Hindoo, of whom everyone had tired on account of his light fingers and calumniating tongue, grew increasingly burdensome to his adopted family, and spent most of his time in stoning Professor No No from a safe distance and demanding his wages even to that day, together with a passage at once to the white country.

During this season no ship at all came to Uvea, though Professor No No watched unceasingly for one, and likewise Billy Hindoo, and likewise Malamalama, the chief; and Tanielu prayed and prayed and prayed without end, "Lord, send Thou speedily a vessel and rid us of these intruders." The white man, for all his wisdom, was cowardly beyond belief, and so fearful of Malamalama that the sight of Salesa made him tremble forthwith with apprehension. And she, repelled by her husband and dependent on the bounty of those that despised her, became as one lost to all propriety, and would run at Professor No No and clasp him in her arms and cherish him, he fighting and resisting with all his might, crying "No, no!" in a terrible voice. Were he to unmoor his boat, lo! she was there swimming in its wake and demanding to be taken in, lest she drown; were he to sit down and quietly look at dead fish through bits of glass, lo! there also was she beside him in a chair; were he to slumber in a shady place during the afternoon, he would awake with his head in her lap or with her kisses against his lips.

So weak, indeed, was his heart, that he was not even grateful for her assistance against Billy Hindoo, who came constantly, this day and that, with unfailing regularity, to throw stones at his former master and cry threateningly, "Hi, yi! give me wages even to this day, and return me to the white country according to thy covenant." Then it was that Salesa would throw stones back again, or would hide in the bushes and try to strike the nigger with a knife, saying in mockery as she sprang at him, "Hi, yi! take that!" And once she came to him so close that she slashed him across the breast, and he hastened bleeding before the ancients and vociferously complained. Then she was whipped again by the matrons, and Billy Hindoo was fined for throwing stones, and Professor No No was fined yet a second time for stealing away Malamalama's wife, and

Malamalama was fined for leading a life of infamy and riot, and Tanielu said again from the pulpit, "Hasten, Lord, or Thy servants perish!"

Thus the days passed in unending strife and bitterness, terrible now to be recalled. When Malamalama took a new wife, the former wife's family would lie in wait and try to kill him; and other husbands, before exemplary and well conducted, growing restive to see him so successful in his unbridled wickedness, took in their turn the pick of the village maids, propagating hatred and disorder the like of which had never before been known in Uvea. Then the drought came, and the young nuts shriveled on the trees, and the sky, as far as one's eye could reach, remained like shining copper, without a breath. It was plainly seen that God, in anger, was laying His hand heavily on Uvea; and lo! He spoke through the pastor Tanielu, saying, "Repent, repent, or else ye perish!"

There was a great meeting of the ancients in the speak-house; and one ancient spoke for Malamalama, and another ancient spoke for Salesa, and another ancient spoke for Professor No No, and still another ancient spoke for Billy Hindoo; and the whole matter was inquired into from the first day and debated in turn by all the ancients, and a final judgment at length arrived at. Malamalama was confirmed in his latest marriage, swearing with his hand on the Holy Book that in future he would cease his evil and cling to her, giving a fine mat by way of reparation to each of her predecessors; and Salesa was declared divorced from Malamalama, and she and Professor No No were ordered to marry themselves forthwith before the pastor Tanielu; and Billy Hindoo was commanded to go back to his master and remain within the taboo line under pain of death, and an ancient was appointed to visit him daily to lash him if he misbehaved even in the smallest matter; and then the whole meeting prayed first for rain, and then that God might send a ship.

When the new arrangement was with difficulty explained to the white man, he was as one crazed, waving his arms and screaming out "No, no!" without cessation; and he persisted thus, to the scandal of everyone, until Tanielu, losing patience, struck him like that on the head and married him immediately to Salesa, whose face shone with contentment and happiness. In this manner Professor No No and Salesa and Billy Hindoo were escorted homeward to their camp; and then everyone breathed with relief and congratulated one another on so peaceful and satisfactory a settlement.

But the ancients were still in their places when Salesa returned, saying that Professor No No had repulsed her; and behind her was Billy Hindoo, equally repulsed, who said his master refused to pay him his wages to that day or to send him back at once to the white country according to the covenant; and behind them both was Professor No No with his head tied in a towel, where the pastor had hurt him, cursing and reviling like a maniac.

Then the ancients held another meeting; and lo! it was a secret meeting; and Tanielu spoke for God, and everyone made speeches in turn; and it was recalled, with eloquent outbursts, how peaceful and happy Uvea had been in the days preceding Professor No No's arrival. There were some who wanted to have him killed as a punishment; and others who voted against Salesa, saying it was she who was at fault; and still others who burned with resentment against Billy Hindoo, declaring that he was the worst of all. Thus, like a battle rolling to and fro, Salesa, Professor No No, and Billy Hindoo were each in turn imperiled; and when day broke, their fate, though they knew it not, had been finally settled by the ancients.

Professor No No's boat was carried by twenty men from the lagoon shore, where it lay, over to the ocean beach; and with it was borne sardines and biscuit and beer from the white man's store; and the glass barrels were emptied, many of them, of their dead fish, being washed and refilled with fresh water from the spring, and their glass tops fastened tightly with cocoanut sinnet. Then, when everything had been made ready, Billy Hindoo was forced to seat himself in the bow of the boat; and in the stern were put Salesa and Professor No No, side by side, the center being filled with the cargo of provisions and water.

And Salesa laughed and joked with the men, begging them to take out Billy Hindoo, or to give him a boat of his own; and saying wildly, when denied, that she was going where none might whip her now, to find a beautiful island whereon to live with her husband. But the white man was convulsed with fear, and said nothing in the making ready of the boat, not even "No, no" when Salesa put her arms round him and kissed him again and again on the lips; and Billy Hindoo shook like a wet dog in the bow, whimpering, "Hi, yi! me British subject! me no likey!" babbling deliriously besides of his wages even to that day, and of the

unfulfilled covenant with its passage to the white country in a ship.

Then the sail was hoisted and the sheet put into Salesa's hand; and in this wise the boat was shoved into deep water, and her bow headed straight to seaward. Then Tanielu fell on his knees and prayed that Uvea might be delivered forever and ever of such an infliction; and the young men formed a line with their rifles, ready to shoot if the voyagers showed the least sign of coming back; and across the waves one could see Salesa supporting Professor No No as the boat lay over in the wind, and her mocking laughter was borne back to us. And we waited and waited and waited as it became a diminishing speck against the sky; and waited and waited and waited until it disappeared. Then, lo! there were explosions of thunder and lightning, and the rain descended in torrents, and the little children all threw off their clothes and ran about rejoicing in the wet, while the elders looked at one another, and said, "Lo, Uvea is delivered!"



THE STRENGTH OF TEN

Project Gutenberg's *Little Stories of Married Life*, by Mary Stewart Cutting

AFTER plunging from the light and comfort of the heated train to the track, just below the little Gothic station of Braewood, John Atterbury had well-nigh half a mile to walk before reaching his suburban residence. The way led in part across untilled fields from the inclosures of which bars had been removed to facilitate the passage of daily commuters. In the slant sunlight of a summer evening, with insects chirping in the dusty grass by the side of the worn foot-path, and a fresh breeze from outlying meadows scented with clover and milkweed to fan the brow of the toiler, this walk served as a pleasant approach, in the company of conversational friends, to further country refreshment—the hammock on the verandah, the intimate society of rosebushes, or a little putting on the sward at the back of the house. But on a night in January, with the thermometer five degrees above zero, and a fierce wind blowing out of illimitable blackness, life in the

suburbs demanded strenuous will-power. Men put their heads down and ran in silence, with overcoats tightly buttoned, and hands beating together, their footsteps sounding heavily on the frozen earth.

The wind cut John Atterbury's strong lungs like a knife, and his feet seemed to stumble against the cold as if it had been a visible barrier. Moreover, he bore within him no lightness of spirit, but all the chill and fatigue of a hard day spent in business transactions that have come to nothing, added to the bitter knowledge of an immediate and pressing need for money in the common uses of life. He had a numbing sense of defeat, and worse than that, of inadequacy. If the man whom he was to meet to-night did not bring relief, he knew not where to turn. His tired brain revolved subconsciously futile plans for the morrow, while his one overmastering desire was to reach the light and warmth and rest of the cozy house that sheltered his young wife and three small children.

With a sharp pang of disappointment, he perceived, as he turned the corner, that the front of the villa was in darkness except for a dim light in his wife's room, and as he opened the door with his latch key no gush of hot air greeted him, but a stony coldness. He knocked against a go-cart in the square hall on his way to light the gas, and his wife's voice called down softly,

"Is that you, dear?"

"Yes. Are you ill?"

"No, only resting. Aren't you coming up?"

"In a moment."

He divested himself of his hat and coat, and stood absently trying to warm his hands at the frozen register, and then with a long sigh, prepared to take up this end of the domestic burden with the patient use of habit. He went upstairs with a firm and even step, treading more lightly as he passed the nursery door where the baby was going to sleep under the charge of Katy, the nurse-maid, and entered the room where his wife lay on the lounge in a crimson dressing-gown, a flowered coverlet thrown over her feet, her dark hair lying in rings on the white pillow, and her large, dark eyes turned expectantly toward him. The comfort of

the pretty, luxurious room, which gave no hint of this new poverty in its fittings, was eclipsed by the icy chill that was like an opaque atmosphere.

The wind outside hurled itself at the house and shook the shutters.

Atterbury turned up the gas, and then sat down on the couch by his wife and kissed her.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing but that old pain; it will go over if I lie still—it was my only chance if we are to go out to-night. It’s really better now. I promised Mrs. Harrington faithfully this afternoon that we’d come, in spite of the weather. Do you mind?”

“No. Is Harrington home yet?”

“She expects him back this evening. Oh, Jack, Bridget was sent for this morning before the breakfast things were cleared away. She really didn’t want to go off this time, but that mother of hers—! The children were more troublesome than usual, and had to be taken care of. They’re all asleep now but the baby. I sent them off earlier than usual on account of the cold. Katy is no good around the house, and we’ve had such a day! The furnace—”

“I see that it’s out.”

“Both fires were out, but the range is going now. The wind was all wrong. We made up the furnace three times, but I couldn’t remember how to turn the dampers; they never seemed to be the right way. There’s a grate fire in the nursery, though.”

“The water hasn’t frozen in the pipes, I hope?”

There was an ominous sound in his voice.

She nodded speechlessly, and looked at him, her eyes large with unshed tears.

“Why didn’t you _tell_ me?” He rose for action. “You should have sent for the plumber at once.”

“There wasn’t anyone to send, and it was so late when I found it out; he wouldn’t have come until to-morrow, anyway.”

There was a certain look in his wife’s face at times which filled Atterbury with extreme tenderness. In the seven years of their wedded life she had explained to him every varying grade of emotion which the sight of him caused her, but there were many things which he had never thought of telling her, or even consciously formulating to himself. He went over to the closet, poured out some cordial in a small glass and brought it to her to drink, watching narrowly until a faint tinge of color relieved the bluish pallor around her mouth. Then he poured out another small glass for himself, and spread the down coverlet more closely over her, frustrating her evident desire to rise.

“You lie still.” He passed a heavy, affectionate hand over her forehead, and she rested her cheek against it with a passionate helplessness. “What on earth did you want to do all the work for, to-day? Why didn’t you get the McCaffrey woman? You’ve no business to tire yourself out like this, Agnes. I don’t see how you’re ever going out this evening!”

“Oh, I can go, I’m so much better now. I thought—I know that we have so little money—I wanted to economize; other women seem to do such things without any trouble at all.”

“Well, we won’t economize that way. Always get what help is necessary.” He spoke with the quick, matter-of-fact decision of a man used to affairs, temporarily regardless of the financial situation, whose cramping iron restrictions could be felt at every turn. “I’ll go down now and start things up!”

“Your dinner is in the oven. I’ll send Katy to you as soon as Herbert is asleep. She can’t leave him now, for he crawls over the crib and drops out.”

“All right! Don’t you worry, I’ll get it.”

He ran downstairs, arrayed for service, and Agnes listened to his

receding footsteps, a warm comfort in her heart despite that racking of the bones, as of one “smote hip and thigh,” which comes to the delicately-born with unaccustomed kitchen-work. After some moments—spent, as she guiltily divined, in searching for the coal shovel—the clatter and rattle of the furnace showed that a master hand had taken it in charge.

Atterbury stoked and shoveled with every quick sense suddenly concentrated on a deep and hidden care. If anything should happen to his wife—vague, yet awful phrase—if anything should “happen” to his wife! She was not made for struggle; the doctor had told him that before. He knew, none better! how brave, loving, yet sensitive a spirit was housed in that tender and fragile body. If she were to leave him and their little children—

No mist came over his eyes at the phantasm, but a sobered keenness of vision gleamed there. There were certain things which it behooved a man to do. He walked over to the coal bins—they were nearly empty. Well, more coal must be ordered at once; he would himself speak about it to Murphy, and make arrangements to pay that last bill—somehow.

A catalogue of indebtedness unrolled itself before him, but he gazed at it steadily. The fog-like depression was gone. He felt in his veins the first tingling of that bitter wine of necessity which invigorates the strong spirit.

And there was Harrington, at whose house the card party was to be held to-night. He drew a long breath, and his heart beat quicker. He had not told his wife how much he counted on seeing Harrington, but he was sure that she had divined it—nothing else would have taken him out again on such a night. This wealthy and genial neighbor had held out great hopes of furthering one scheme of Atterbury’s in that trip out West from which he had just returned. Atterbury had helped Harrington about his patent, and the latter professed himself eager to repay the service. If Harrington had used his influence—as he could use it—and had got the company to look at the land, why, it was as good as sold. Atterbury knew that it held the very qualities for which they were looking. If the plan were a success, then what had been started first as an attractive “flyer” might prove to be a main dependence when most needed. He felt a little bitterly that the friends on whom he had most counted had failed

him. Callender—Nichols—Waring—in their plans there was no room for him. This meeting with Harrington was the crucial point on which the future hung.

When Atterbury went back to his wife, warmed with his work, she was standing before the mirror, dressing; a faint, smoky smell arose from the register. The wind was still evidently in the wrong direction for chimneys. An infant's prattle, mixed with an occasional whimper, came from the nursery.

"I've wrapped hot cloths around the pipes," he said cheerfully, "and left a couple of kerosene lamps lighted on the floor near them. We'll have to take our chances now. What's this envelope on the mantelpiece?" His face fell. "Another assessment from the Association? That makes the eleventh this month, besides the regular insurance, that was due on the first."

"But you can't pay it!" She had looked bright when he came in, but now her lips quivered.

"Oh, I'll have to pay that; don't you worry about it. I tell you, though, Agnes, I'd be worth a good deal more to you dead than I am now."

"Don't! You know I hate to hear you talk like that. I'd never _take_ your old insurance money." She grasped him by her two slender, cold hands and tried ineffectually to shake him while he smiled down at her, and then hid her head on his breast, raising it, however, to say,

"Did you eat your dinner? I hope that it wasn't burned."

"I ate—some of it!"

"Oh," she groaned, "and on such a night!"

"Never mind, I'm counting on a good hot little supper at Harrington's. And, Agnes—" having none of the care of the children, he had a habit of intervening at inopportune moments with well-meant suggestions—"just listen to that child! Don't you think he might go to sleep better if I brought him in here with us for a few moments?"

“_No_,” said his wife. She added afterward, sweetly in token of renewed amity, “He’s such a darling, and he looks more like you every day. He’ll be asleep soon. But I’m sure Gwendolen will have the croup to-night, the house has been so cold.”

“Oh, of course,” said Atterbury grimly. By some weird fatality the festive hour abroad was almost inevitably followed by harrowing attendance on one or other of the infants in the long watches of the night. Husband and wife looked at each other and laughed, and then kissed in silence, like two children, in simple accord.

It was with many instructions to Katy that the Atterburys finally left the house, instructions that comprehended the dampers, the babies, and the pipes.

“I don’t suppose that she will remember a word that we have told her,” said Agnes resignedly.

“Well, we are only going three doors away; I’ll run back after a while and see.”

“I’m so glad I’m going with _you_,” she whispered as they walked the few steps, he trying to shield her from the violence of the wind.

“Ah, yes,” he jibed, “it’s such a new thing, isn’t it, to be with me! You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The Harringtons’ house was certainly a change from the one they had left. Delicious warmth radiated from it as the ample doors unclosed to let the guests in; the crimson-shaded lights were reflected on the card tables and the polished floor, and laughing voices greeted the newcomers.

“You are late,” said the hostess, who was considered handsome, with heavy black eyebrows, dimples in her white, rounded cheeks, and a petulant expression. She wore a bunch of violets in the belt of her light blue gown. “You are late, but not so late as my husband. I expected him home to dinner, and he hasn’t come yet. It’s the way I’m always treated,” she pouted engagingly; “you other men will have to be very, very nice to me.”

She stared with public audacity into the eyes of the man nearest her, and then let her long black lashes sweep her cheek. It pleased her to pose as the attractive young married woman, and by tacit consent the suburban husbands were allowed by their wives to go through the motions of flirting with her.

Atterbury settled down to the strain of waiting. The company was composed of couples who saw each other daily, the men on the trains, the women in their small social rounds. Every event that happened in their little circle was common property, to be discussed by all. The evolution of Mrs. Oliver's black spangled gown, the expensive house which the new doctor was erecting under the auspices of the Building Loan Association, Totty Jenkins' stirring experiences in the kindergarten, and Mr. Waring's sudden substitution of the seven-thirty-one morning train for the eight-fourteen, were subjects interspersed with, and of the same calibre, as discussions on the presidential candidate, the last new book, or affairs in Africa.

In spite of this pooling of interests, so to speak, the weekly gathering at the houses of different members always took on an aspect of novelty. Everyone dressed for the occasion, and there was usually a good game of cards, and a modest little supper afterwards, and the women met other men besides their husbands, and the men met each other and smoked after supper. The only real variety in the programme was that the simple and hearty friendliness beneath all this was more apparent at some houses than at others.

The Harringtons—somewhat new arrivals—were the confessedly rich people of the set, and the entertainments which they gave were characterized with a little more pomp and circumstance. Mrs. Harrington, for all her perfunctory belleship, was a lively and entertaining hostess. Everyone strove to make up to her for Harrington's absence, and a particularly cordial spirit prevailed. It was always a secret trial to Agnes not to play cards at the same table as her husband in the progressive game, but to-night she did not mind, for his steel-blue eyes met hers in a kind, remembering glance whenever she looked for it, that spoke of a sweet and intimate companionship, with which outside events had nothing to do.

In one of the intermissions of the game Atterbury heard Henry Waring say

to Nichols,

“Did you see the little item in one of the evening papers about that Western Company to whom Harrington sold his patent?”

“No, what was it?” asked Nichols.

“They’re going to start up the plant at once near some town in Missouri, I’ve forgotten the name—paid fifty thousand for the ground. You see, they required peculiar natural facilities; that’s what’s kept them back so long. It seems a good deal of money to pay for a clay-bank. Of course, Harrington’s in a hurry to start them up; he’ll get a big royalty.”

“You are not to talk business,” said Mrs. Harrington’s gay voice.

Atterbury felt the room swirl around with him; he knew the name of the town well enough! He had been sure from the first that those barren acres of his held just what the Company was looking for, but he had never dreamed of getting more than ten or fifteen thousand for them. A warm gratitude to Harrington filled him, and then a chill of doubt. The newspaper only chronicled a rumor, not a certainty, for no real sale could take place without his knowledge.

He did not know how he played after this, and it was a tremendous relief when the players left the tables and stood or sat in little home-like groups, all talking and laughing at once in a merry tumult. There was in the air that fragrant aroma of newly-made coffee which is so peculiarly convivial in the suburbs, and the absence of Harrington, who was nevertheless considered to be a jolly good fellow, had ceased to be noticed by anyone but Atterbury, when the sound of wheels was heard grating on the driveway outside. He clutched the chair he stood by, although his face was impassive. The hour he had been waiting for was here—Harrington had come.

Mrs. Harrington ran into the hall with an exclamation of pleasure, as the door opened, letting in a flood of cold air and a large man heavily wrapped in fur. The listening company heard him say,

“What in—time—have you got this crowd here to-night for?” The words were

respectable, but the tone cursed.

There was a stiffening change in her voice. "Hush! Didn't you get my letter?"

"What letter? No, if I had I wouldn't have been fool enough to come home for a quiet night's rest; I might have known I couldn't get it here. You can't live without a lot of people cackling around you."

"Go to bed, then. Nobody wants to see you!" It was the quick thrust of a rapier.

"Much rest I'd get with that mob in there."

The woman flashed back at him with a white heat,

"You have your men's dinners and your wine parties—and you grudge me a little pleasure like this! It's like you; it's like—" For very shame's sake, the guests were hurriedly talking to cover the sounds of strife.

"Harrington's trip evidently hasn't done him much good," said Nichols to Atterbury. "I doubt his success. He has too many large schemes on hand; what he makes in one way he uses to float something else."

"It's possible," said Atterbury thoughtfully.

"It doesn't do to take things like that; if you lose your grip you can't get on."

"That's what I'm finding out now. I don't mind telling you, Mr. Nichols, that I'm in a hole. But you have no experience in that way; your business is secure."

The two men had drawn to one side and were talking in low and confidential tones.

"Is it? I tell you, Atterbury, the time I went through five years ago was awful, simply awful. No, I never said a word to a soul here; nobody even suspected. There was one time when I thought I'd have to send Sue and the babies home to her father, and light out for the Klondike."

“But you didn’t,” said Atterbury, his own pulse leaping to the courage of the other man with a sudden kinship.

“No, I didn’t go. You _can’t_ be discouraged when you have a wife and children to support. Things turned out—it was most unexpected. I’ll tell you all about it some day. It’s well that the opportunities of life are not bounded by our knowledge of them, Atterbury.”

They looked at each other in silence with a large assent.

“By the way, we are rather at a standstill at present,” said Nichols after a pause. “We’ve got to get some one to represent us in South Africa at once—business possibilities are opening up there tremendously. You don’t happen to know of the right person?”

“Myself,” said Atterbury.

“I wish it were possible,” said Nichols politely. “But of course that’s out of the question. We must have some one who thoroughly understands the business, and the machines—one who can take the initiative. The fact is, either Callender or I ought to go, but we can’t leave. We virtually need a third man in the firm, but he must have capital.”

“Please come into the other room, all of you,” said the hostess with a forced playfulness, pulling aside the portières which had concealed the little feast. There was a heightened color in her face, and her eyes were hard. “Mr. Harrington says that he is going to stay in here until we have finished, but I know you won’t miss _him_!”

“Oh, come along in, Harrington,” said Nichols good-naturedly. “Tell us of your travels in the wild and woolly West.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” said Harrington shortly, turning away from the instinctive question in Atterbury’s look with almost brutal rudeness, and pushing past him to an armchair, where he sat down and closed his eyes wearily. He was a big man, with thick, black hair, and a black mustache, which dropped over a heavy chin.

“I’ve passed the nights in beastly sleeping cars, and the days in dining

and wining a lot of low, greasy politicians. I'm _dog_-tired." There were deep lines in his low forehead and under his eyes—and his large, white, powerful hand clasped and unclasped nervously.

"You go in there, both of you. I'm all broke up. My wife will entertain you; her damn chatter drives me mad!"

"I'll stay here with you," said Atterbury resolutely.

"I will send your supper in to you," called Mrs. Harrington lightly, as she saw him draw up a chair to one of the deserted card tables near which Harrington was sitting with his eyes still closed and his head leaned back against the cushions.

He paid no attention to the dishes, but Atterbury ate and drank quickly, like the hungry man he was, though hardly knowing what he tasted, except that it was warm and good. Then he sat absently looking at the scene in the supper room where the guests were grouped around the table, the wax-lights in the candelabra illumining the women opposite him; Mrs. Harrington's brilliant eyes and blue gown, the fair hair and scarlet draperies of pretty Mrs. Waring, the white teeth and charming smile of black-robed Mrs. Callender, and the old-rose bodice, slender neck, and dusky, drooping head that belonged to Agnes.

* * * * *

In spite of the festive appearance, there was manifest chill and restraint. The men, all but Callender and Nichols, who talked apart, had shifted over to seats by their wives, a position which does not require due exertion in the matter of entertainment. It is difficult to eat and drink merrily when your host is palpably waiting for your departure. Agnes's hand shook as she held the cup of hot coffee to which she had been looking forward, and her creamed oysters were untouched while she tried to open a conversation with Mrs. Callender all about the Book Club.

* * * * *

"Well," said Atterbury suddenly after a while, "what have you got to say to me, Harrington?" The other man's manner was offensive, but Atterbury

was disposed to be conciliating.

Harrington unclosed his heavy, dark-ringed eyes and gazed at him.

“What have I got to say to you?” He gave a short laugh. “Why, nothing that I know of—nothing but that I have an internal headache.” There was an extraordinary undercurrent of insolence in his manner which Atterbury was at a loss to explain.

“I am sorry to have to disturb you if you are ill,” said Atterbury in level tones, “but a word will suffice, Harrington. I know that the land is virtually sold—it was in the evening paper. How much does it bring?”

“What land?”

“My land.”

“I don’t know anything about your property; the ground that the Company bought belonged to me.”

“To you! You never told me that you owned any in Missouri.”

“Do I have to tell you everything?” Harrington’s black eyes were contemptuously defiant.

“No, but you will have to tell me this,” said Atterbury.

Harrington shifted uneasily. “Well, then, take the truth if you want it. I meant to keep faith with you fairly enough, and I would have stuck to your interests if I could have afforded to—that’s the whole gist of the matter. And you’ve no case for complaint; we hadn’t signed any agreement.”

“You found another section like mine?”

Harrington nodded. “Nearly as good. I bought it for a song, and the Company sent out a surveyor and a couple of geologists of their own to look it up, and paid me fifty thousand for it—that is, indirectly, of course. I didn’t appear in the sale and by—I lost every cent in a deal yesterday.” He swore under his breath.

“You used the private information I gave you, I suppose?” said Atterbury in dangerously low tones.

A flicker of a smile crossed Harrington’s moody face.

“Well, yes. You gave me the points, and I used them; any man would.”

“You miserable—sneaking—liar!” said Atterbury very slowly. He rose, and brought both hands down on the table with a gesture that did not lose in power because it made no sound. “No man that lives shall cheat me with impunity. I’ll brand you for what you are!”

“You can’t,” said Harrington insolently.

Atterbury smiled with the scorn which disdained reply, and turned on his heel. He did not see the startled glance of Nichols and Callender as he went over to a place beside them. His wife wondered, as they did, at a new royalty in his tall bearing, as of one used to high command, and bowed herself in adoration before it.

He defeated, he cast down! In that moment of tingling indignation he felt himself a conqueror; nor obstacle, nor loss, nor circumstance, nor treachery should stand in his way. This blow had felled the last barrier that confined a free spirit, superbly at one with the elemental force which displaces atoms and creates new worlds.

The current of a mighty strength was in him, dominant, compelling, that strength which in some mysterious way has a volition of its own, apart from him who possesses it, bending men and events to his uses.

There was a vibrant tone in his voice as he said,

“Mr. Nichols, I want to go to South Africa for you.”

The gaze of the two men met with almost an electric shock.

“But you don’t know the business!”

The protest half invited discussion.

“I can learn it.”

“We don’t want a man _to learn_,” said Callender, speaking for the first time. “You must understand that, Atterbury! We can find men on every street corner who would like to learn. We want some one with a good working knowledge, who has had experience, and is familiar with our machines and our methods—one who can leave his family—and has capital—”

Atterbury shook his head. “No! You want a man like me, one who cannot only handle your machines, but handle men, and has had experience outside of your narrow line. Good heavens, Callender, the man you speak of—barring the capital—can almost be picked up at the street corners. Your house is full of such as he—good, plodding, trustworthy men, who understand what they have been taught about your machines and your accounts and your methods, and who understand nothing else; who stick to their desks year in and year out. Will one like that do for you? You know that it will not! Granted that I _don’t_ know the business as you do—that’s but a detail; I know what business really _is_. Granted that I’ve got no capital—I’ve got the one thing you really need, and that’s the brains and energy to get it for _you_. Take me into your conferences, give me a fighting knowledge of what you want, and I’ll bring in the capital.

“The export trade has a tremendous future; my mind’s been full of it lately. You send me to South Africa—to China—to the Philippines, and I’ll undertake to double the business in three years, but you mustn’t confine yourself to one narrow line; you must broaden out. You ought to be able to distance all your competitors; you ought to be able to merge them in your own company. For many reasons I can be worth more to you than any other man you know. Great Scott, Nichols, can’t you _see_ that I’m the opportunity you want?”

Nichols sat immovable, holding on to the arms of his chair with both hands. Facing the light of Atterbury’s face, the answering light shone in his own. Callender still objected, although plainly under great excitement.

“You haven’t managed your own affairs so well.”

“No,” said Atterbury, turning on him like lightning, “and you know why. You know just what claims the death of Anderson laid upon me, and how I’ve tried to carry them. They will be paid off now. Callender, you’re not worth my powder and shot; you’re just talking. Mr. Nichols, I’m speaking to you. You know I can handle this thing!”

Both men rose unconsciously and looked at each other, with a long breath between them.

“When will you send me out?” asked Atterbury at last with his brilliant smile.

“Come to me to-morrow at ten,” said Nichols, giving his hand to the other, who grasped it silently. “Mind, I don’t promise anything.”

“No, we don’t promise anything,” agreed the excited Callender.

“No,” said Atterbury jubilantly, “that’s all right. We’ve got a great future before us, my friends.”

As he wheeled around he caught sight of Harrington, whom he had momentarily forgotten.

“Ah,” he said airily, “do either of you own any stock in our host’s Company? It may be just as well for you to investigate a little; you may find that as the treasurer he’s been speculating with the funds. I’ll give you my reasons for this also—to-morrow.”

“Come,” he said to Agnes, “we must be going.” As they stepped out once more into the darkness, the wind nearly hurled them off their feet; a million icy points of snow pricked and stung the face. She clung to him, and he put his arm around her and swept her through the storm as a lover might his bride, unknowing of it.

Yet for all that warm clasp, she subtly felt the severance of his thought from her, and when they were safely landed in the hall, she said nervously,

“What was that I heard you saying to Mr. Nichols? You’re not going to leave me!”

Her tone had in it the universal protest of womankind, to whom the bodily desertion is less than the spiritual one that makes it possible.

He bent his ardent eyes upon her with a glow which she had never seen in them even in the earliest days of their love.

“Ah, but it will be only to come back to _you_,” he said with a leap forward to a joy that made parting dim, and she looked up at him with a soul so steeped in love that for the moment she could only desire what he did.

The evidences of a clinging domesticity were again around them; fierce blasts of heat from the furnace showed that Katy had peacefully forgotten the dampers; the water dripped, dripped into the kitchen sink from the thawing pipes. A hollow clanging cough from the upper regions told that poor little Gwendolen’s post-festive croup had indeed set in, but even this no longer appeared a bitter and blasting ill to Atterbury, but merely a temporary discomfort, to be gone with the morrow.

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'ANNA ON THE NECK'

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Party and Other Stories*, by Anton Chekhov

I

AFTER the wedding they had not even light refreshments; the happy pair simply drank a glass of champagne, changed into their travelling things, and drove to the station. Instead of a gay wedding ball and supper, instead of music and dancing, they went on a journey to pray at a shrine a hundred and fifty miles away. Many people commended this, saying that Modest Alexeitch was a man high up in the service and no longer young, and that a noisy wedding might not have seemed quite suitable; and music is apt to sound dreary when a government official of fifty-two marries a girl who is only just eighteen. People said, too, that Modest Alexeitch, being a man of principle, had arranged this visit to the monastery expressly in order to make his young bride realize that even in marriage he put religion and morality above everything.

The happy pair were seen off at the station. The crowd of relations and colleagues in the service stood, with glasses in their hands, waiting for the train to start to shout "Hurrah!" and the bride's father, Pyotr Leontyitch, wearing a top-hat and the uniform of a teacher, already drunk and very pale, kept craning towards the window, glass in hand and saying in an imploring voice:

"Anyuta! Anya, Anya! one word!"

Anna bent out of the window to him, and he whispered something to her, enveloping her in a stale smell of alcohol, blew into her ear --she could make out nothing--and made the sign of the cross over her face, her bosom, and her hands; meanwhile he was breathing in gasps and tears were shining in his eyes. And the schoolboys, Anna's brothers, Petya and Andrusha, pulled at his coat from behind, whispering in confusion:

"Father, hush! . . . Father, that's enough. . . ."

When the train started, Anna saw her father run a little way after the train, staggering and spilling his wine, and what a kind, guilty, pitiful face he had:

"Hurra--ah!" he shouted.

The happy pair were left alone. Modest Alexeitch looked about the compartment, arranged their things on the shelves, and sat down, smiling, opposite his young wife. He was an official of medium height, rather stout and puffy, who looked exceedingly well nourished, with long whiskers and no moustache. His clean-shaven, round, sharply defined chin looked like the heel of a foot. The most characteristic point in his face was the absence of moustache, the bare, freshly shaven place, which gradually passed into the fat cheeks, quivering like jelly. His deportment was dignified, his movements were deliberate, his manner was soft.

"I cannot help remembering now one circumstance," he said, smiling. "When, five years ago, Kosorotov received the order of St. Anna of the second grade, and went to thank His Excellency, His Excellency

expressed himself as follows: 'So now you have three Annas: one in your buttonhole and two on your neck.' And it must be explained that at that time Kosorotov's wife, a quarrelsome and frivolous person, had just returned to him, and that her name was Anna. I trust that when I receive the Anna of the second grade His Excellency will not have occasion to say the same thing to me."

He smiled with his little eyes. And she, too, smiled, troubled at the thought that at any moment this man might kiss her with his thick damp lips, and that she had no right to prevent his doing so. The soft movements of his fat person frightened her; she felt both fear and disgust. He got up, without haste took off the order from his neck, took off his coat and waistcoat, and put on his dressing-gown.

"That's better," he said, sitting down beside Anna.

Anna remembered what agony the wedding had been, when it had seemed to her that the priest, and the guests, and every one in church had been looking at her sorrowfully and asking why, why was she, such a sweet, nice girl, marrying such an elderly, uninteresting gentleman. Only that morning she was delighted that everything had been satisfactorily arranged, but at the time of the wedding, and now in the railway carriage, she felt cheated, guilty, and ridiculous. Here she had married a rich man and yet she had no money, her wedding-dress had been bought on credit, and when her father and brothers had been saying good-bye, she could see from their faces that they had not a farthing. Would they have any supper that day? And tomorrow? And for some reason it seemed to her that her father and the boys were sitting tonight hungry without her, and feeling the same misery as they had the day after their mother's funeral.

"Oh, how unhappy I am!" she thought. "Why am I so unhappy?"

With the awkwardness of a man with settled habits, unaccustomed to deal with women, Modest Alexeitch touched her on the waist and patted her on the shoulder, while she went on thinking about money, about her mother and her mother's death. When her mother died, her father, Pyotr Leontyitch, a teacher of drawing and writing in the high school, had taken to drink, impoverishment had followed, the boys had not had boots or goloshes, their father had been hauled

up before the magistrate, the warrant officer had come and made an inventory of the furniture. . . . What a disgrace! Anna had had to look after her drunken father, darn her brothers' stockings, go to market, and when she was complimented on her youth, her beauty, and her elegant manners, it seemed to her that every one was looking at her cheap hat and the holes in her boots that were inked over. And at night there had been tears and a haunting dread that her father would soon, very soon, be dismissed from the school for his weakness, and that he would not survive it, but would die, too, like their mother. But ladies of their acquaintance had taken the matter in hand and looked about for a good match for Anna. This Modest Alexevitch, who was neither young nor good-looking but had money, was soon found. He had a hundred thousand in the bank and the family estate, which he had let on lease. He was a man of principle and stood well with His Excellency; it would be nothing to him, so they told Anna, to get a note from His Excellency to the directors of the high school, or even to the Education Commissioner, to prevent Pyotr Leontyitch from being dismissed.

While she was recalling these details, she suddenly heard strains of music which floated in at the window, together with the sound of voices. The train was stopping at a station. In the crowd beyond the platform an accordion and a cheap squeaky fiddle were being briskly played, and the sound of a military band came from beyond the villas and the tall birches and poplars that lay bathed in the moonlight; there must have been a dance in the place. Summer visitors and townspeople, who used to come out here by train in fine weather for a breath of fresh air, were parading up and down on the platform. Among them was the wealthy owner of all the summer villas--a tall, stout, dark man called Artynov. He had prominent eyes and looked like an Armenian. He wore a strange costume; his shirt was unbuttoned, showing his chest; he wore high boots with spurs, and a black cloak hung from his shoulders and dragged on the ground like a train. Two boar-hounds followed him with their sharp noses to the ground.

Tears were still shining in Anna's eyes, but she was not thinking now of her mother, nor of money, nor of her marriage; but shaking hands with schoolboys and officers she knew, she laughed gaily and said quickly:

"How do you do? How are you?"

She went out on to the platform between the carriages into the moonlight, and stood so that they could all see her in her new splendid dress and hat.

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked.

"This is a junction. They are waiting for the mail train to pass."

Seeing that Artynov was looking at her, she screwed up her eyes coquettishly and began talking aloud in French; and because her voice sounded so pleasant, and because she heard music and the moon was reflected in the pond, and because Artynov, the notorious Don Juan and spoiled child of fortune, was looking at her eagerly and with curiosity, and because every one was in good spirits--she suddenly felt joyful, and when the train started and the officers of her acquaintance saluted her, she was humming the polka the strains of which reached her from the military band playing beyond the trees; and she returned to her compartment feeling as though it had been proved to her at the station that she would certainly be happy in spite of everything.

The happy pair spent two days at the monastery, then went back to town. They lived in a rent-free flat. When Modest Alexevitch had gone to the office, Anna played the piano, or shed tears of depression, or lay down on a couch and read novels or looked through fashion papers. At dinner Modest Alexevitch ate a great deal and talked about politics, about appointments, transfers, and promotions in the service, about the necessity of hard work, and said that, family life not being a pleasure but a duty, if you took care of the kopecks the roubles would take care of themselves, and that he put religion and morality before everything else in the world. And holding his knife in his fist as though it were a sword, he would say:

"Every one ought to have his duties!"

And Anna listened to him, was frightened, and could not eat, and she usually got up from the table hungry. After dinner her husband lay down for a nap and snored loudly, while Anna went to see her

own people. Her father and the boys looked at her in a peculiar way, as though just before she came in they had been blaming her for having married for money a tedious, wearisome man she did not love; her rustling skirts, her bracelets, and her general air of a married lady, offended them and made them uncomfortable. In her presence they felt a little embarrassed and did not know what to talk to her about; but yet they still loved her as before, and were not used to having dinner without her. She sat down with them to cabbage soup, porridge, and fried potatoes, smelling of mutton dripping. Pyotr Leontyitch filled his glass from the decanter with a trembling hand and drank it off hurriedly, greedily, with repulsion, then poured out a second glass and then a third. Petya and Andrusha, thin, pale boys with big eyes, would take the decanter and say desperately:

"You mustn't, father. . . . Enough, father. . . ."

And Anna, too, was troubled and entreated him to drink no more; and he would suddenly fly into a rage and beat the table with his fists:

"I won't allow any one to dictate to me!" he would shout. "Wretched boys! wretched girl! I'll turn you all out!"

But there was a note of weakness, of good-nature in his voice, and no one was afraid of him. After dinner he usually dressed in his best. Pale, with a cut on his chin from shaving, craning his thin neck, he would stand for half an hour before the glass, prinking, combing his hair, twisting his black moustache, sprinkling himself with scent, tying his cravat in a bow; then he would put on his gloves and his top-hat, and go off to give his private lessons. Or if it was a holiday he would stay at home and paint, or play the harmonium, which wheezed and growled; he would try to wrest from it pure harmonious sounds and would sing to it; or would storm at the boys:

"Wretches! Good-for-nothing boys! You have spoiled the instrument!"

In the evening Anna's husband played cards with his colleagues, who lived under the same roof in the government quarters. The wives of these gentlemen would come in—ugly, tastelessly dressed women,

as coarse as cooks--and gossip would begin in the flat as tasteless and unattractive as the ladies themselves. Sometimes Modest Alexevitch would take Anna to the theatre. In the intervals he would never let her stir a step from his side, but walked about arm in arm with her through the corridors and the foyer. When he bowed to some one, he immediately whispered to Anna: "A civil councillor . . . visits at His Excellency's"; or, "A man of means . . . has a house of his own." When they passed the buffet Anna had a great longing for something sweet; she was fond of chocolate and apple cakes, but she had no money, and she did not like to ask her husband. He would take a pear, pinch it with his fingers, and ask uncertainly:

"How much?"

"Twenty-five kopecks!"

"I say!" he would reply, and put it down; but as it was awkward to leave the buffet without buying anything, he would order some seltzer-water and drink the whole bottle himself, and tears would come into his eyes. And Anna hated him at such times.

And suddenly flushing crimson, he would say to her rapidly:

"Bow to that old lady!"

"But I don't know her."

"No matter. That's the wife of the director of the local treasury! Bow, I tell you," he would grumble insistently. "Your head won't drop off."

Anna bowed and her head certainly did not drop off, but it was agonizing. She did everything her husband wanted her to, and was furious with herself for having let him deceive her like the veriest idiot. She had only married him for his money, and yet she had less money now than before her marriage. In old days her father would sometimes give her twenty kopecks, but now she had not a farthing.

To take money by stealth or ask for it, she could not; she was afraid of her husband, she trembled before him. She felt as though

she had been afraid of him for years. In her childhood the director of the high school had always seemed the most impressive and terrifying force in the world, sweeping down like a thunderstorm or a steam-engine ready to crush her; another similar force of which the whole family talked, and of which they were for some reason afraid, was His Excellency; then there were a dozen others, less formidable, and among them the teachers at the high school, with shaven upper lips, stern, implacable; and now finally, there was Modest Alexeitch, a man of principle, who even resembled the director in the face. And in Anna's imagination all these forces blended together into one, and, in the form of a terrible, huge white bear, menaced the weak and erring such as her father. And she was afraid to say anything in opposition to her husband, and gave a forced smile, and tried to make a show of pleasure when she was coarsely caressed and defiled by embraces that excited her terror. Only once Pyotr Leontyitch had the temerity to ask for a loan of fifty roubles in order to pay some very irksome debt, but what an agony it had been!

"Very good; I'll give it to you," said Modest Alexeitch after a moment's thought; "but I warn you I won't help you again till you give up drinking. Such a failing is disgraceful in a man in the government service! I must remind you of the well-known fact that many capable people have been ruined by that passion, though they might possibly, with temperance, have risen in time to a very high position."

And long-winded phrases followed: "inasmuch as . . .", "following upon which proposition . . .", "in view of the aforesaid contention . . ."; and Pyotr Leontyitch was in agonies of humiliation and felt an intense craving for alcohol.

And when the boys came to visit Anna, generally in broken boots and threadbare trousers, they, too, had to listen to sermons.

"Every man ought to have his duties!" Modest Alexeitch would say to them.

And he did not give them money. But he did give Anna bracelets, rings, and brooches, saying that these things would come in useful

for a rainy day. And he often unlocked her drawer and made an inspection to see whether they were all safe.

II

Meanwhile winter came on. Long before Christmas there was an announcement in the local papers that the usual winter ball would take place on the twenty-ninth of December in the Hall of Nobility. Every evening after cards Modest Alexeitch was excitedly whispering with his colleagues' wives and glancing at Anna, and then paced up and down the room for a long while, thinking. At last, late one evening, he stood still, facing Anna, and said:

"You ought to get yourself a ball dress. Do you understand? Only please consult Marya Grigoryevna and Natalya Kuzminishna."

And he gave her a hundred roubles. She took the money, but she did not consult any one when she ordered the ball dress; she spoke to no one but her father, and tried to imagine how her mother would have dressed for a ball. Her mother had always dressed in the latest fashion and had always taken trouble over Anna, dressing her elegantly like a doll, and had taught her to speak French and dance the mazurka superbly (she had been a governess for five years before her marriage). Like her mother, Anna could make a new dress out of an old one, clean gloves with benzine, hire jewels; and, like her mother, she knew how to screw up her eyes, lisp, assume graceful attitudes, fly into raptures when necessary, and throw a mournful and enigmatic look into her eyes. And from her father she had inherited the dark colour of her hair and eyes, her highly-strung nerves, and the habit of always making herself look her best.

When, half an hour before setting off for the ball, Modest Alexeitch went into her room without his coat on, to put his order round his neck before her pier-glass, dazzled by her beauty and the splendour of her fresh, ethereal dress, he combed his whiskers complacently and said:

"So that's what my wife can look like . . . so that's what you can look like! Anyuta!" he went on, dropping into a tone of solemnity, "I have made your fortune, and now I beg you to do something for

mine. I beg you to get introduced to the wife of His Excellency! For God's sake, do! Through her I may get the post of senior reporting clerk!"

They went to the ball. They reached the Hall of Nobility, the entrance with the hall porter. They came to the vestibule with the hat-stands, the fur coats; footmen scurrying about, and ladies with low necks putting up their fans to screen themselves from the draughts. There was a smell of gas and of soldiers. When Anna, walking upstairs on her husband's arm, heard the music and saw herself full length in the looking-glass in the full glow of the lights, there was a rush of joy in her heart, and she felt the same presentiment of happiness as in the moonlight at the station. She walked in proudly, confidently, for the first time feeling herself not a girl but a lady, and unconsciously imitating her mother in her walk and in her manner. And for the first time in her life she felt rich and free. Even her husband's presence did not oppress her, for as she crossed the threshold of the hall she had guessed instinctively that the proximity of an old husband did not detract from her in the least, but, on the contrary, gave her that shade of piquant mystery that is so attractive to men. The orchestra was already playing and the dances had begun. After their flat Anna was overwhelmed by the lights, the bright colours, the music, the noise, and looking round the room, thought, "Oh, how lovely!" She at once distinguished in the crowd all her acquaintances, every one she had met before at parties or on picnics--all the officers, the teachers, the lawyers, the officials, the landowners, His Excellency, Artynov, and the ladies of the highest standing, dressed up and very _décolletées_, handsome and ugly, who had already taken up their positions in the stalls and pavilions of the charity bazaar, to begin selling things for the benefit of the poor. A huge officer in epaulettes--she had been introduced to him in Staro-Kievsky Street when she was a schoolgirl, but now she could not remember his name--seemed to spring from out of the ground, begging her for a waltz, and she flew away from her husband, feeling as though she were floating away in a sailing-boat in a violent storm, while her husband was left far away on the shore. She danced passionately, with fervour, a waltz, then a polka and a quadrille, being snatched by one partner as soon as she was left by another, dizzy with music and the noise, mixing Russian with French, lisping, laughing, and

with no thought of her husband or anything else. She excited great admiration among the men--that was evident, and indeed it could not have been otherwise; she was breathless with excitement, felt thirsty, and convulsively clutched her fan. Pyotr Leontyitch, her father, in a crumpled dress-coat that smelt of benzine, came up to her, offering her a plate of pink ice.

"You are enchanting this evening," he said, looking at her rapturously, "and I have never so much regretted that you were in such a hurry to get married. . . . What was it for? I know you did it for our sake, but . . ." With a shaking hand he drew out a roll of notes and said: "I got the money for my lessons today, and can pay your husband what I owe him."

She put the plate back into his hand, and was pounced upon by some one and borne off to a distance. She caught a glimpse over her partner's shoulder of her father gliding over the floor, putting his arm round a lady and whirling down the ball-room with her.

"How sweet he is when he is sober!" she thought.

She danced the mazurka with the same huge officer; he moved gravely, as heavily as a dead carcase in a uniform, twitched his shoulders and his chest, stamped his feet very languidly--he felt fearfully disinclined to dance. She fluttered round him, provoking him by her beauty, her bare neck; her eyes glowed defiantly, her movements were passionate, while he became more and more indifferent, and held out his hands to her as graciously as a king.

"Bravo, bravo!" said people watching them.

But little by little the huge officer, too, broke out; he grew lively, excited, and, overcome by her fascination, was carried away and danced lightly, youthfully, while she merely moved her shoulders and looked slyly at him as though she were now the queen and he were her slave; and at that moment it seemed to her that the whole room was looking at them, and that everybody was thrilled and envied them. The huge officer had hardly had time to thank her for the dance, when the crowd suddenly parted and the men drew themselves up in a strange way, with their hands at their sides.

His Excellency, with two stars on his dress-coat, was walking up to her. Yes, His Excellency was walking straight towards her, for he was staring directly at her with a sugary smile, while he licked his lips as he always did when he saw a pretty woman.

"Delighted, delighted . . ." he began. "I shall order your husband to be clapped in a lock-up for keeping such a treasure hidden from us till now. I've come to you with a message from my wife," he went on, offering her his arm. "You must help us. . . . M-m-yes. . . . We ought to give you the prize for beauty as they do in America M-m-yes. . . . The Americans. . . . My wife is expecting you impatiently."

He led her to a stall and presented her to a middle-aged lady, the lower part of whose face was disproportionately large, so that she looked as though she were holding a big stone in her mouth.

"You must help us," she said through her nose in a sing-song voice. "All the pretty women are working for our charity bazaar, and you are the only one enjoying yourself. Why won't you help us?"

She went away, and Anna took her place by the cups and the silver samovar. She was soon doing a lively trade. Anna asked no less than a rouble for a cup of tea, and made the huge officer drink three cups. Artynov, the rich man with prominent eyes, who suffered from asthma, came up, too; he was not dressed in the strange costume in which Anna had seen him in the summer at the station, but wore a dress-coat like every one else. Keeping his eyes fixed on Anna, he drank a glass of champagne and paid a hundred roubles for it, then drank some tea and gave another hundred--all this without saying a word, as he was short of breath through asthma. . . . Anna invited purchasers and got money out of them, firmly convinced by now that her smiles and glances could not fail to afford these people great pleasure. She realized now that she was created exclusively for this noisy, brilliant, laughing life, with its music, its dancers, its adorers, and her old terror of a force that was sweeping down upon her and menacing to crush her seemed to her ridiculous: she was afraid of no one now, and only regretted that her mother could not be there to rejoice at her success.

Pyotr Leontyitch, pale by now but still steady on his legs, came up to the stall and asked for a glass of brandy. Anna turned crimson, expecting him to say something inappropriate (she was already ashamed of having such a poor and ordinary father); but he emptied his glass, took ten roubles out of his roll of notes, flung it down, and walked away with dignity without uttering a word. A little later she saw him dancing in the grand chain, and by now he was staggering and kept shouting something, to the great confusion of his partner; and Anna remembered how at the ball three years before he had staggered and shouted in the same way, and it had ended in the police-sergeant's taking him home to bed, and next day the director had threatened to dismiss him from his post. How inappropriate that memory was!

When the samovars were put out in the stalls and the exhausted ladies handed over their takings to the middle-aged lady with the stone in her mouth, Artynov took Anna on his arm to the hall where supper was served to all who had assisted at the bazaar. There were some twenty people at supper, not more, but it was very noisy. His Excellency proposed a toast:

"In this magnificent dining-room it will be appropriate to drink to the success of the cheap dining-rooms, which are the object of today's bazaar."

The brigadier-general proposed the toast: "To the power by which even the artillery is vanquished," and all the company clinked glasses with the ladies. It was very, very gay.

When Anna was escorted home it was daylight and the cooks were going to market. Joyful, intoxicated, full of new sensations, exhausted, she undressed, dropped into bed, and at once fell asleep. . . .

It was past one in the afternoon when the servant waked her and announced that M. Artynov had called. She dressed quickly and went down into the drawing-room. Soon after Artynov, His Excellency called to thank her for her assistance in the bazaar. With a sugary smile, chewing his lips, he kissed her hand, and asking her permission to come again, took his leave, while she remained standing in the

middle of the drawing-room, amazed, enchanted, unable to believe that this change in her life, this marvellous change, had taken place so quickly; and at that moment Modest Alexeitch walked in . . . and he, too, stood before her now with the same ingratiating, sugary, cringingly respectful expression which she was accustomed to see on his face in the presence of the great and powerful; and with rapture, with indignation, with contempt, convinced that no harm would come to her from it, she said, articulating distinctly each word:

"Be off, you blockhead!"

From this time forward Anna never had one day free, as she was always taking part in picnics, expeditions, performances. She returned home every day after midnight, and went to bed on the floor in the drawing-room, and afterwards used to tell every one, touchingly, how she slept under flowers. She needed a very great deal of money, but she was no longer afraid of Modest Alexeitch, and spent his money as though it were her own; and she did not ask, did not demand it, simply sent him in the bills. "Give bearer two hundred roubles," or "Pay one hundred roubles at once."

At Easter Modest Alexeitch received the Anna of the second grade. When he went to offer his thanks, His Excellency put aside the paper he was reading and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"So now you have three Annas," he said, scrutinizing his white hands and pink nails--"one on your buttonhole and two on your neck."

Modest Alexeitch put two fingers to his lips as a precaution against laughing too loud and said:

"Now I have only to look forward to the arrival of a little Vladimir. I make bold to beg your Excellency to stand godfather."

He was alluding to Vladimir of the fourth grade, and was already imagining how he would tell everywhere the story of this pun, so happy in its readiness and audacity, and he wanted to say something equally happy, but His Excellency was buried again in his newspaper, and merely gave him a nod.

And Anna went on driving about with three horses, going out hunting with Artynov, playing in one-act dramas, going out to supper, and was more and more rarely with her own family; they dined now alone. Pyotr Leontyitch was drinking more heavily than ever; there was no money, and the harmonium had been sold long ago for debt. The boys did not let him go out alone in the street now, but looked after him for fear he might fall down; and whenever they met Anna driving in Staro-Kievsky Street with a pair of horses and Artynov on the box instead of a coachman, Pyotr Leontyitch took off his top-hat, and was about to shout to her, but Petya and Andrusha took him by the arm, and said imploringly:

"You mustn't, father. Hush, father!"

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BERENICE

The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume 2

Dicebant mihi sodales, si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas
meas aliquantulum forelevatas.

--_Ebn Zaiat_.

MISERY is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow, its hues are as various as the hues of that arch--as distinct too, yet as intimately blended. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow! How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness?--from the covenant of peace, a simile of sorrow? But as, in ethics, evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born. Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of to-day, or the agonies which _are_, have their origin in the ecstasies which _might_ have been_.

My baptismal name is Egaeus; that of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries; and in many striking particulars--in the character of the family mansion--in the frescos of the chief saloon--in the tapestries of the

dormitories--in the chiselling of some buttresses in the armory--but more especially in the gallery of antique paintings--in the fashion of the library chamber--and, lastly, in the very peculiar nature of the library's contents--there is more than sufficient evidence to warrant the belief.

The recollections of my earliest years are connected with that chamber, and with its volumes--of which latter I will say no more. Here died my mother. Herein was I born. But it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before--that the soul has no previous existence. You deny it?--let us not argue the matter. Convinced myself, I seek not to convince. There is, however, a remembrance of aerial forms--of spiritual and meaning eyes--of sounds, musical yet sad--a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow--vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady; and like a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist.

In that chamber was I born. Thus awaking from the long night of what seemed, but was not, nonentity, at once into the very regions of fairy land--into a palace of imagination--into the wild dominions of monastic thought and erudition--it is not singular that I gazed around me with a startled and ardent eye--that I loitered away my boyhood in books, and dissipated my youth in reverie; but it is singular that as years rolled away, and the noon of manhood found me still in the mansion of my fathers--it is wonderful what stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life--wonderful how total an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thought. The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself.

* * * * *

Berenice and I were cousins, and we grew up together in my paternal halls. Yet differently we grew--I, ill of health, and buried in gloom--she, agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers, the ramble on the hill-side--mine the studies of the cloister; I, living within my own heart, and addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation--she, roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the

raven-winged hours. Berenice!--I call upon her name--Berenice!--and from the gray ruins of memory a thousand tumultuous recollections are startled at the sound! Ah, vividly is her image before me now, as in the early days of her light-heartedness and joy! Oh, gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh, sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! Oh, Naiad among its fountains! And then--then all is mystery and terror, and a tale which should not be told. Disease--a fatal disease, fell like the simoon upon her frame; and, even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person! Alas! the destroyer came and went!--and the victim--where is she? I knew her not--or knew her no longer as Berenice.

Among the numerous train of maladies superinduced by that fatal and primary one which effected a revolution of so horrible a kind in the moral and physical being of my cousin, may be mentioned as the most distressing and obstinate in its nature, a species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in _trance_ itself--trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was in most instances, startlingly abrupt. In the mean time my own disease--for I have been told that I should call it by no other appellation--my own disease, then, grew rapidly upon me, and assumed finally a monomaniac character of a novel and extraordinary form--hourly and momentarily gaining vigor--and at length obtaining over me the most incomprehensible ascendancy. This monomania, if I must so term it, consisted in a morbid irritability of those properties of the mind in metaphysical science termed the _attentive_. It is more than probable that I am not understood; but I fear, indeed, that it is in no manner possible to convey to the mind of the merely general reader, an adequate idea of that nervous _intensity of interest_ with which, in my case, the powers of meditation (not to speak technically) busied and buried themselves, in the contemplation of even the most ordinary objects of the universe.

To muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin, or in the typography of a book; to become absorbed, for the better part of a summer's day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the floor; to lose myself, for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a

flower; to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in: such were a few of the most common and least pernicious vagaries induced by a condition of the mental faculties, not, indeed, altogether unparalleled, but certainly bidding defiance to anything like analysis or explanation.

Yet let me not be misapprehended. The undue, earnest, and morbid attention thus excited by objects in their own nature frivolous, must not be confounded in character with that ruminating propensity common to all mankind, and more especially indulged in by persons of ardent imagination. It was not even, as might be at first supposed, an extreme condition, or exaggeration of such propensity, but primarily and essentially distinct and different. In the one instance, the dreamer, or enthusiast, being interested by an object usually *_not_* frivolous, imperceptibly loses sight of this object in a wilderness of deductions and suggestions issuing therefrom, until, at the conclusion of a day dream *_often_* replete with luxury, he finds the *_incitamentum_*, or first cause of his musings, entirely vanished and forgotten. In my case, the primary object was *_invariably_* frivolous, although assuming, through the medium of my distempered vision, a refracted and unreal importance. Few deductions, if any, were made; and those few pertinaciously returning in upon the original object as a centre. The meditations were *_never_* pleasurable; and, at the termination of the reverie, the first cause, so far from being out of sight, had attained that supernaturally exaggerated interest which was the prevailing feature of the disease. In a word, the powers of mind more particularly exercised were, with me, as I have said before, the *_attentive_*, and are, with the day-dreamer, the *_speculative_*.

My books, at this epoch, if they did not actually serve to irritate the disorder, partook, it will be perceived, largely, in their imaginative and inconsequential nature, of the characteristic qualities of the disorder itself. I well remember, among others, the treatise of the noble Italian, Coelius Secundus Curio, "*_De Amplitudine Beati Regni Dei_*;" St. Austin's great work, the "*City of God*;" and Tertullian's "*_De Carne Christi_*," in which the paradoxical sentence "*_Mortuus est Dei filius; credible est quia ineptum est: et sepultus resurrexit; certum est quia impossibile est_*," occupied my undivided time, for many weeks

of laborious and fruitless investigation.

Thus it will appear that, shaken from its balance only by trivial things, my reason bore resemblance to that ocean-crag spoken of by Ptolemy Hephestion, which steadily resisting the attacks of human violence, and the fiercer fury of the waters and the winds, trembled only to the touch of the flower called Asphodel. And although, to a careless thinker, it might appear a matter beyond doubt, that the alteration produced by her unhappy malady, in the moral condition of Berenice, would afford me many objects for the exercise of that intense and abnormal meditation whose nature I have been at some trouble in explaining, yet such was not in any degree the case. In the lucid intervals of my infirmity, her calamity, indeed, gave me pain, and, taking deeply to heart that total wreck of her fair and gentle life, I did not fail to ponder, frequently and bitterly, upon the wonder-working means by which so strange a revolution had been so suddenly brought to pass. But these reflections partook not of the idiosyncrasy of my disease, and were such as would have occurred, under similar circumstances, to the ordinary mass of mankind. True to its own character, my disorder revelled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice--in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity.

During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her. In the strange anomaly of my existence, feelings with me, had never been of the heart, and my passions always were of the mind. Through the gray of the early morning--among the trellised shadows of the forest at noonday--and in the silence of my library at night--she had flitted by my eyes, and I had seen her--not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream; not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being; not as a thing to admire, but to analyze; not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation. And now--now I shuddered in her presence, and grew pale at her approach; yet, bitterly lamenting her fallen and desolate condition, I called to mind that she had loved me long, and, in an evil moment, I spoke to her of marriage.

And at length the period of our nuptials was approaching, when, upon an afternoon in the winter of the year--one of those unseasonably

warm, calm, and misty days which are the nurse of the beautiful Halcyon (*1),--I sat, (and sat, as I thought, alone,) in the inner apartment of the library. But, uplifting my eyes, I saw that Berenice stood before me.

Was it my own excited imagination--or the misty influence of the atmosphere--or the uncertain twilight of the chamber--or the gray draperies which fell around her figure--that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline? I could not tell. She spoke no word; and I--not for worlds could I have uttered a syllable. An icy chill ran through my frame; a sense of insufferable anxiety oppressed me; a consuming curiosity pervaded my soul; and sinking back upon the chair, I remained for some time breathless and motionless, with my eyes riveted upon her person. Alas! its emaciation was excessive, and not one vestige of the former being lurked in any single line of the contour. My burning glances at length fell upon the face.

The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, the teeth of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died!

* * * * *

The shutting of a door disturbed me, and, looking up, I found that my cousin had departed from the chamber. But from the disordered chamber of my brain, had not, alas! departed, and would not be driven away, the white and ghastly spectrum of the teeth. Not a speck on their surface--not a shade on their enamel--not an indenture in their edges--but what that period of her smile had sufficed to brand in upon my memory. I saw them now even more unequivocally than I beheld them then. The teeth!--the teeth!--they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the

very moment of their first terrible development. Then came the full fury of my monomania, and I struggled in vain against its strange and irresistible influence. In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. For these I longed with a phrenzied desire. All other matters and all different interests became absorbed in their single contemplation. They--they alone were present to the mental eye, and they, in their sole individuality, became the essence of my mental life. I held them in every light. I turned them in every attitude. I surveyed their characteristics. I dwelt upon their peculiarities. I pondered upon their conformation. I mused upon the alteration in their nature. I shuddered as I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression. Of Mademoiselle Salle it has been well said, "Que tous ses pas etaient des sentiments," and of Berenice I more seriously believed que toutes ses dents etaient des idées. Des idées!--ah here was the idiotic thought that destroyed me! Des idées!--ah therefore it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason.

And the evening closed in upon me thus--and then the darkness came, and tarried, and went--and the day again dawned--and the mists of a second night were now gathering around--and still I sat motionless in that solitary room--and still I sat buried in meditation--and still the phantasma of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy, as, with the most vivid hideous distinctness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber. At length there broke in upon my dreams a cry as of horror and dismay; and thereunto, after a pause, succeeded the sound of troubled voices, intermingled with many low moanings of sorrow or of pain. I arose from my seat, and throwing open one of the doors of the library, saw standing out in the ante-chamber a servant maiden, all in tears, who told me that Berenice was--no more! She had been seized with epilepsy in the early morning, and now, at the closing in of the night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed.

* * * * *

I found myself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone. It seemed that I had newly awakened from a confused and exciting dream.

I knew that it was now midnight, and I was well aware, that since the setting of the sun, Berenice had been interred. But of that dreary period which intervened I had no positive, at least no definite comprehension. Yet its memory was replete with horror--horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity. It was a fearful page in the record my existence, written all over with dim, and hideous, and unintelligible recollections. I strived to decypher them, but in vain; while ever and anon, like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing in my ears. I had done a deed--what was it? I asked myself the question aloud, and the whispering echoes of the chamber answered me,--" _what was it? _"

On the table beside me burned a lamp, and near it lay a little box. It was of no remarkable character, and I had seen it frequently before, for it was the property of the family physician; but how came it _there_, upon my table, and why did I shudder in regarding it? These things were in no manner to be accounted for, and my eyes at length dropped to the open pages of a book, and to a sentence underscored therein. The words were the singular but simple ones of the poet Ebn Zaiat:--" _Dicebant mihi sodales si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas meas aliquantulum fore levatas_." Why then, as I perused them, did the hairs of my head erect themselves on end, and the blood of my body become congealed within my veins?

There came a light tap at the library door--and, pale as the tenant of a tomb, a menial entered upon tiptoe. His looks were wild with terror, and he spoke to me in a voice tremulous, husky, and very low. What said he?--some broken sentences I heard. He told of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night--of the gathering together of the household--of a search in the direction of the sound; and then his tones grew thrillingly distinct as he whispered me of a violated grave--of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing--still palpitating--_still alive_!

He pointed to garments;--they were muddy and clotted with gore. I spoke not, and he took me gently by the hand: it was indented with the impress of human nails. He directed my attention to some object against the wall. I looked at it for some minutes: it was a spade. With a shriek I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. But I could

not force it open; and in my tremor, it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor.



LA FIN D'AUTOMNE

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Contes Fantastiques*, by Jules Janin

Rien n'égale en beautés de tous genres la noble habitation du vicomte de Lagarde. Le château est à huit petites lieues de Paris, dans un village dont nous taisons le nom par égard pour le curé; maintenons toujours la paix et la concorde entre les autorités d'une même commune et ne brouillons pas le château et le presbytère.

Il serait difficile de trouver quelque part, même à Meudon, un parc mieux ombragé, des allées mieux remplies de soleil et d'ombre. Portique élégant, vaste écurie où l'écho joyeux des voûtes retentit du robuste hennissement des chevaux. Dans les cours nettes et spacieuses, on entend bouillonner la fontaine. Ici des griffons, contemporains des magots de la cheminée, laissent s'échapper à regret un mince filet d'eau de leur gueule entr'ouverte; là, des têtes de bronze, ornements de l'Empire, ami du fer, renvoient l'eau à gros bouillons dans des cuves de marbre. Il y a de l'eau... même dans la rivière du jardin; des brochets effilés et des carpes limoneuses y passent de loin en loin, en furetant. Du reste, point de gibier dans les fourrés du parc, à peine quelque pigeon échappé de la basse-cour.

Lagarde n'est pas une de ces habitations modernes, construites au cours de la rente, avec des statues de plâtre, une façade peinte en jaune, un toit à l'italienne, et précédée de quelques pieds de terrain disposés en jardin anglais, c'est une maison solide à l'antique seigneurie. Les murs sont recouverts d'un épais manteau de lierre; les

pierres de taille, grises et cendrées, sont encadrées de mousse; les pavés des cours ne se refusent pas quelques touffes d'herbe. Le château est éloigné de la route, et bien posé au milieu de son parc qui s'ouvre en quelques endroits, sur des chemins écartés, auxquels il communique par des grilles chargées de rouille. Ces ouvertures sont un repos dans le chemin. Le voyageur va coller son visage à ces barreaux complaisants, et regarde le domaine; il sourit de regret en apercevant une ceinture et un chapeau de paille oubliés sur un banc de mousse, ou sur le siège de bois à demi vermoulu, qui borde l'allée fleurie, et bienveillante, dont les flancs seuls se laissent entrevoir.

Ce jour-là, vers l'automne (l'oiseau chante encore, l'arbre en est à sa dernière verdure, et la rose se tient de toutes ses forces pour rester belle), il y avait grand déjeuner au château de Lagarde; déjeuner d'hommes mariés, échappés aux pièges décevants de la jeunesse. Chacun des convives avait vanté son bonheur à l'envi. Pendant tout le repas, ils criaient au choc joyeux des verres, comme un chœur d'opéra qui détonne: «Vive le mariage! Il est l'état le plus heureux du monde! Honte au célibat! L'homme le plus heureux est celui qui garde en réserve, un raisonnable contingent de désirs à satisfaire. Or, le mariage peut seul nous maintenir dans cette tiède et moyenne température de désirs modérés!» Tels étaient les discours confus, diffus, menteurs.

Chacun des convives décriait le passé, pour avoir le droit de le regretter tout bas. C'était un torrent de louanges sur la félicité conjugale, et pour que leur action fût bienséante avec leurs discours, ils s'étaient arrêtés à cet état de demi-ivresse dans lequel l'esprit est obligé de veiller de près sur soi-même, crainte de tomber dans une embûche.

Ils vantaient donc la destinée conjugale avec le fanatisme de nouveaux convertis.

--Moi, disait l'un, j'apprends à épeler à ma petite fille d'après une nouvelle méthode, et je lis à ma femme l'Amour Maternel de Millevoye, pour la mettre au fait de ses devoirs.

--Je suis artiste en peinture, Alphonsine me sert à ravir. Ne me parlez plus de ces indignes prostituées, les modèles de mes premiers

ouvrages, qui se mettent toutes nues pour un petit écu. Alphonsine me tient lieu des plus beaux modèles.... Et pour conclure, il avalait un grand verre de vin de Champagne.

--Moi, messieurs, disait un troisième, ma femme est poète et païenne comme Voltaire; Corinne est son nom de baptême! Elle compose des vers sur les premiers sujets venus, sur la pluie et le beau temps, sur l'hyménée et sur l'enfance, sur moi-même.

--Certes, messieurs, s'écria Prosper Lagarde, l'amphytrion, impatienté de tous leurs épithalames, vos tableaux de bonheur domestique sont d'une séduisante couleur; reste à savoir si le talent de l'artiste n'a rien déguisé. Amis, que j'ai choisis parmi tous les mortels! s'il vous plaît, allons aux faits, point de déclamations, venez voir ce que fait ma femme! Elle est là-bas, au bout de la galerie, au milieu de ses fleurs; elle fuit le bruit du monde; elle a nom Suzanne, pour vous servir.

Sans le savoir, M. de Lagarde faisait pour ses amis ce que le roi Caudale avait fait pour son confident Gygès. Les convives acceptèrent avec empressement la proposition.

Ils quittèrent la table tant bien que mal, et Prosper commandant la troupe, ils arrivèrent sur la pointe du pied, par une longue file d'appartements, à une porte vitrée, à peine protégée par un léger rideau de soie. Prosper souleva le rideau d'une main légère et d'un air satisfait, se rangeant poliment pour que tout le monde pût tout voir; si bien qu'ils purent contempler à loisir la jeune vicomtesse, en robe du matin, lâche et flottante, assise sur un sofa, sans prétention; auprès d'elle était assis un jeune homme qui tenait sa tête près de la sienne, une main passée dans ses cheveux... et leurs lèvres se touchaient!

Madame de Lagarde! Elle était dans ces heureux moments de passion où la passion s'oublie, où l'amour rêve éveillé, où la femme adorée ne voit rien de ce qui l'approche. Cependant, les yeux fixés sur le beau jeune homme, elle vit fort bien à travers la croisée les convives l'oeil fixé sur elle. O pitié! Alors elle poussa un grand cri: le jeune homme s'élança par la croisée et disparut.

Prosper, laissant tomber le coin du rideau, regarda ses cinq amis... stupéfaits!

Il les reconduisit en silence, jusqu'à la porte de son parc; aucun d'eux n'osa risquer un mot de consolation; ils se séparèrent.

Les voitures parties, le vicomte ferma lui-même la grille du parc; et regagna le château.

Heureusement l'avenue qui menait au château était longue et déserte. Le vicomte de Lagarde était fort laid, chauve, grêlé, n'ayant pour lui qu'un oeil brillant et des dents _charmantes_; mot qui semble inventé pour les femmes, et qu'elles seules savent prononcer. Dans le monde, il passait pour manquer d'esprit. On l'appelait: _la Barbe-Bleue_, attendu que sa barbe était rousse; aussi ce n'était point sans quelque appréhension qu'il avait épousé sa Suzanne, jeune blonde de seize ans, riche et volontaire. Il convenait qu'elle était trop jolie, et pour bien faire, il lui passait bien des caprices d'enfant gâté, qui contrastaient avec le ton grave et sérieux d'un homme de l'âge où l'on n'est plus jeune. Il n'était donc pas étonné, mais il fut vraiment malheureux de cette aventure.

Et pourtant, à travers les souvenirs du festin, il cherchait encore à douter de la fatale scène, croyant à une vision! Ah! vain espoir! ce qu'il avait vu de ses yeux, l'obsédait sans rémission. Il avait beau faire, il revoyait cette jeune femme à demi renversée entre les bras d'un beau jeune homme, ivre d'amour!

--C'était écrit! pensait-il: voici ma femme, à son tour, qui me trahit pour un autre, et tout est dans l'ordre, hélas!

Puis il continuait, pensant tout haut:

--Où en est la journée? Il est six heures du soir. C'est la fin d'une heureuse soirée d'automne. Voilà bien mes jeunes allées d'acacias et de tilleuls, mes bordures de thym qui répandent sur mes pas leur senteur vulgaire, mes roses éplorées qui s'effeuillent sur les pelouses, mes longs peupliers qui semblent se pencher l'un vers l'autre, en se racontant ma triste histoire! A ces parfums, à ces bruits qui se croisent, à ces murmures confus de la soirée, je

reconnais le signal d'adieu, l'heure d'extase d'un beau jour qui va finir.

»Au dehors, dans les prairies voisines, les chèvres agitant leurs sonnettes; le trot des vaches que les petites filles chassent devant elles; la chanson des jeunes enfants revenant de gros paquets d'herbes sur la tête, et dans le lointain, le marteau des forgerons.--Malheureux que je suis! Voilà la nature impitoyable! Elle nous rend plus sensibles à ses touchants spectacles, quand nous avons dans l'âme quelque peine secrète au logis.»

En rentrant dans la salle à manger, il fut désagréablement surpris de retrouver les débris de son déjeuner d'amis. Rien n'avait été dérangé; l'air de l'appartement gardait encore une odeur de vins éventés, de poisson, de gibier. Il se prit à sourire, en croisant les bras sur ce triste champ de bataille, jonché de bouteilles. Il crut voir encore ses sots convives vantant leurs femmes en s'abreuvant de ses vins; tandis que la sienne, à lui, la sienne! Ah! Suzanne!!--Allons, se dit-il, je suis fou; et il marcha droit à l'appartement de sa femme.

Je ne sais quel Elysée annonçait la chambre à coucher de madame de Lagarde! Il y avait dans chaque pièce une odeur de fleurs d'automne, et de si beaux meubles! Tout ce luxe frais et fragile d'un jeune ménage!

Hélas! disait ce triste mari, elle est heureuse!... Et il sentit que sa colère l'abandonnait.

Il trouva cette enfant dans une posture à demi tragique, égarée, échevelée, assez disposée à lui donner une scène de désespoir. Elle avait à ses côtés une arme d'Asie, à égorger un Turc, qu'elle avait empruntée à l'armoire des curiosités; et sur un guéridon, près d'elle, crouissait dans un pot de terre un breuvage de couleur grisâtre, un poison de contrebande qui se fabrique avec de gros sous.

--Choisissez, du fer ou du poison, monsieur!... lui dit-elle à la façon de madame Dorval.

Il ne put s'empêcher de sourire.

--Ah fi! dit-il, un poignard, du poison! que signifient ces instruments mélodramatiques? Instruisez-moi; je ne saurais saisir à moi seul, le sens de tout ceci.

La vicomtesse le regarda d'un air incrédule; c'était la première fois qu'elle s'arrêtait à le contempler, la première fois qu'elle se sentait le besoin d'avoir une opinion arrêtée sur le compte de son mari...

--Je conçois cela, pensa-t-elle, il fait de l'ironie, et tout à l'heure la colère aura son tour.--Mais enfin, je suis coupable, monsieur!

--Je vous l'accorde, madame, dit le vicomte.

--Dites, monsieur, dites-le tout de suite, quel sera mon châtiment? Je sais que le mari prévient la loi, pour rendre sa vengeance plus terrible et que la loi lui permet...

--Adultère, interrompit Prosper, adultère; cela s'appelle adultère dans les romans et dans le Code pénal. C'est un mot auquel on s'apprivoisera difficilement, Suzanne, ajouta-t-il en se plaçant auprès d'elle sur le canapé; mais non contente de la chose, voulez-vous m'en imposer le pénible attirail?

Il tenait dans sa main les mains de sa femme. Elle avait ôté ses bagues, signe dramatique de malheur et de désespoir.

--Hélas! dit-elle en hontoyant, vous voulez me punir à force d'égards, m'accabler de ma faute, et m'assassiner par des galanteries moqueuses et des marques d'amour que je ne mérite plus!

--Que vous êtes injuste, répondait Prosper, avec ces tristes intentions que vous me supposez. Peut-être ne seriez-vous pas très-fâchée de me voir lever contre vous ce coutelas dont vous avez eu soin de vous munir. C'est un enfantillage inexcusable, ma chère Lucrèce. Vous feriez mieux, je vous jure, de me savoir quelque gré de la façon dont je prends tout ceci; car, enfin, je n'ai pas oublié que, tout à l'heure, un autre ici, tantôt, mes amis pour témoins, était assis sur ce canapé, près de vous! Mais où donc est-il le séducteur,

l'infâme, que je le tue, et que je me venge en même temps de vous et de lui!

Et il marchait dans la chambre le couperet en main; puis, quand il eut bien fait la grosse voix et les grands yeux, il revint s'asseoir, en souriant, près de sa femme. Il y avait dans cet acte subit de Prosper un mouvement de plaisanterie forcée qui fit mal à Suzanne. Il lui semblait que son mari voulait lui dire:--Voyez, je veux rire de votre faute, et pourtant vous sentez que j'en plaisante mal, que je n'en puis rire qu'à demi! Elle était attendrie, et comprenait confusément que l'intention de son mari était de tout oublier. Mais comment vivraient-ils désormais?

--Vous me pardonnez? dit-elle à tout hasard, en prenant la main de Prosper avec un geste adorable; ah! que vous êtes bon.

--Quel mot dites-vous là, ma chère? Pardon! est un mot trop solennel pour en abuser; un simple mot ne saurait avoir la vertu de rappeler l'amitié ou l'amour évanouis, ces sentimens si prompts à s'effaroucher, mais qui reviennent si vite... A demain...

Suzanne resta seule dans son appartement, qui communiquait à celui de son mari par une porte d'alcôve. Il se garda bien de faire le moindre bruit, de peur de se nuire à lui-même, intervenant en personne aux rêveries de sa femme, aux impressions qu'il lui avait laissées.

Cependant elle se sentait profondément agitée; la conduite de son mari l'occupait, et bouleversait sa pauvre tête; elle s'était dit dans un moment d'ennui:

--J'aurai aussi mon jour de faiblesse; et si mon mari surprend mon séducteur, il me tuera!... Alors elle avait bâti son drame; elle avait conduit le drame au quatrième acte, jusqu'à la scène de l'adultère inclusivement; mais à présent la fin du drame n'arrivait pas; son mari ne l'égorgeait pas sur la place et sa catastrophe lui manquait. Cependant, elle relevait sur son front ses beaux cheveux; elle pleurait, et priait Dieu du bout de ses lèvres coupables...

Enfin elle se coucha, abandonnée à l'espérance. Elle sentait qu'elle avait reçu l'absolution d'un grand péché; elle pleurait, elle

tremblait; car si son mari se fût irrité contre elle, il eût fallu partir la nuit même, avec un étranger, traverser les froides allées du parc avec sa pelisse de bal sur ses épaules nues, quitter sa chambre à coucher qu'elle aimait, ses fleurs, ses vases, son lit de duvet, sa couche de dentelles. Bientôt un sommeil léger la berça dans ses bras: elle eut une mauvaise pensée, une vision bizarre... Prosper!... Frédéric... Sainte Vierge! Elle s'endormit.

Heureusement la journée du lendemain fut belle; et tous deux le mari et la femme, venus dans le parc de grand matin, se rencontrèrent devant un Amour en plâtre, et dont les ailes étaient brisées. On eût dit, à les voir, deux jeunes amants qui venaient prononcer des vœux aux pieds de quelque statue de la mythologie d'autrefois, du temps d'Emilie et de M. Demoustier.

Ils parcoururent les allées du parc, l'un à côté de l'autre, et marchant à petits pas, sans se regarder ni trop ni trop peu, et comme ils se seraient promenés la veille au matin, s'ils s'étaient promenés. Ils s'extasiaient de tout ce qu'ils voyaient, remarquant une première feuille desséchée, un nid abandonné, des plumes d'oiseau, une goutte de rosée scintillante au buisson. Ils s'arrêtaient à chaque fleur, au moindre insecte, et quelqu'un qui les eût entendus n'aurait eu rien à dire, en voyant cet homme au front grisonnant, en contemplation devant la jeune femme qu'il avait surprise avec son amant! O l'heureux crime et qui les rapprochait l'un de l'autre: c'était comme un lien tout nouveau qui les rendait amants, d'époux qu'ils étaient.

Ainsi, pour ces deux coupables, ce qui devait mêler le rire aux larmes de leur sentiment, c'étaient les fautes de la femme, et les fautes que le monde a cru défendre en y attachant sa risée... Il y avait dans les yeux de la dame un regard qui semblait dire: Hélas! c'est vrai! Un autre était hier à mes genoux; je l'écoutais... C'est toi que j'écoute aujourd'hui! Un autre fut un instant mon préféré, maintenant son souvenir seul fait ma honte!... Ils disaient tout cela ces beaux yeux au trop heureux Lagarde! Et ses yeux répondaient: Oui, tu m'as trahi, comme dirait le monde; un autre à ma place, et, pour se venger, te livrerait aux remords, à l'abandon, mais loin de moi ces pensées, ma Suzanne, puisque je t'aime encore, puisque tu me sembles plus belle et plus charmante... Oubliions, veux-tu, l'heure fatale, et que le rideau de ta porte soit retombé pour toujours!

Ainsi il parlait, la regardant avec un amour tout nouveau; plus il pardonnait à Suzanne, et plus il se faisait petit devant elle... Il l'admirait! Il s'étonnait du courage de cette femme d'un corps si frêle et d'un nom si chaste, qui avait osé lui faire le dernier outrage, à lui, vicomte de Lagarde. Elle avait osé tout cela!

Il fallut que Suzanne lui racontât les moindres détails de ses amours avec Frédéric, car il s'appelait Frédéric. --Figurez-vous, disait-elle, la plus plate intrigue de comédie. Un colonel, une femme de chambre et une échelle sous mes fenêtres. Des billets roses qui vous feraient rire de pitié, et qui font mal à la tête; des vers entremêlés de prose, de la prose coupée par des vers. Elle parla de cette fade intrigue avec le mépris le plus vrai et le mieux senti: elle n'eut pas assez de sarcasmes pour ce poltron moustachu qui s'en va comme il est venu, par la fenêtre, furtif amant qui se cache. Ah! qu'elle se trouvait sotte à l'entendre. Aussi son mari fut complètement rassuré. En vain il cherchait dans le récit de sa femme un souvenir qu'il aurait eu le mérite de dompter...

Ainsi la saison qui avait commencé tristement pour les hôtes du château de Lagarde, se termina en grâce ineffable.

C'était un ménage qui manquait d'équilibre; grâce à _Monsieur Frédéric_, l'équilibre se rétablit, et le vicomte de Lagarde fut doublement heureux. Quoi de mieux? il aimait, on l'aimait.

L'hiver les rappelant à la ville, ils revinrent à Paris l'oreille un peu basse, et bien que Prosper n'eût pas commandé à ses amis du déjeuner de garder le silence sur son aventure, tout Paris en était instruit.

Au contraire, il arriva que les hommes voyant Prosper devenu _l'attentif_ de sa femme, heureux de lui parler à coeur ouvert, saluèrent le vicomte comme le plus habile des époux, le Talleyrand des ménages; de leur côté les femmes le proclamèrent homme d'esprit; si bien que notre héros, à les entendre, devait penser, sentir, aimer, haïr autrement que tous les maris d'ici-bas.

Il y avait déjà longtemps que M. Frédéric, pour s'être vanté mal à

propos de la conquête _de la petite vicomtesse_, avait reçu du vicomte un bon coup d'épée qui l'avait tué, pour lui apprendre à vivre.

Et la vicomtesse, jeune et belle, et compromise par cinq témoins et par un duel, n'eut plus, de ce jour-là, ni poursuivants d'un âge mûr, ni jeunes poitrinaires attachés à ses pas, ni rivales dangereuses. Les femmes se jugeaient aisément supérieures à cette _malheureuse_ et gardaient la conscience de leur vertu. Quant aux hommes, ils portèrent ailleurs leurs soupirs, et laissèrent le vicomte en repos. Pourquoi voulez-vous que les hommes se mettent à soupirer quand la plus douce faveur qu'ils puissent obtenir est déjà divulguée, quand il n'y a plus ni secret, ni larcin?

Le jeune couple fut donc à la mode tout l'hiver; il se vit accueilli dans les salons les plus sévères sur les bienséances, les plus fidèles à la prudence de l'étiquette. On les reçut comme deux étrangers qui ignoraient encore nos usages et nos mœurs.

Grâce à cette aimable histoire... on causa... Dieu sait si l'on causa! Chacun citait aux nouveaux mariés, comme un modèle de félicité conjugale, un ménage où la femme ne s'était permis qu'une seule erreur. Plusieurs époux voulurent user du même moyen; mais il se trouva que leurs femmes avaient déjà pris les devants.

Et ceux-là chantèrent, en guise de _Te Deum_, le: _Gaudeant_, les _bien nantis_!



A DEAL IN COTTON

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Actions and Reactions*, by Rudyard Kipling

Long and long ago, when Devadatta was King of Benares, I wrote some tales concerning Strickland of the Punjab Police (who married Miss Youghal), and Adam, his son. Strickland has finished his Indian Service,

and lives now at a place in England called Weston-super-Mare, where his wife plays the organ in one of the churches. Semi-occasionally he comes up to London, and occasionally his wife makes him visit his friends. Otherwise he plays golf and follows the harriers for his figure's sake.

If you remember that Infant who told a tale to Eustace Cleever the novelist, you will remember that he became a baronet with a vast estate. He has, owing to cookery, a little lost his figure, but he never loses his friends. I have found a wing of his house turned into a hospital for sick men, and there I once spent a week in the company of two dismal nurses and a specialist in "Sprue." Another time the place was full of schoolboys--sons of Anglo-Indians whom the Infant had collected for the holidays, and they nearly broke his keeper's heart.

But my last visit was better. The Infant called me up by wire, and I fell into the arms of a friend of mine, Colonel A.L. Corkran, so that the years departed from us, and we praised Allah, who had not yet terminated the Delights, nor separated the Companions.

Said Corkran, when he had explained how it felt to command a native Infantry regiment on the border: "The Stricks are coming for to-night-with their boy."

"I remember him. The little fellow I wrote a story about," I said. "Is he in the Service?"

"No. Strick got him into the Centro-Euro-Africa Protectorate. He's Assistant-Commissioner at Dupe--wherever that is. Somaliland, ain't it, Stalky?" asked the Infant.

Stalky puffed out his nostrils scornfully. "You're only three thousand miles out. Look at the atlas."

"Anyhow, he's as rotten full of fever as the rest of you," said the Infant, at length on the big divan. "And he's bringing a native servant with him. Stalky be an athlete, and tell Ipps to put him in the stable room."

"Why? Is he a Yao--like the fellow Wade brought here--when your housekeeper had fits?" Stalky often visits the Infant, and has seen some

odd things.

"No. He's one of old Strickland's Punjabi policemen--and quite European--I believe."

"Hooray! Haven't talked Punjabi for three months--and a Punjabi from Central Africa ought to be amusin'."

We heard the chuff of the motor in the porch, and the first to enter was Agnes Strickland, whom the Infant makes no secret of adoring.

He is devoted, in a fat man's placid way, to at least eight designing women; but she nursed him once through a bad bout of Peshawur fever, and when she is in the house, it is more than all hers.

"You didn't send rugs enough," she began. "Adam might have taken a chill."

"It's quite warm in the tonneau. Why did you let him ride in front?"

"Because he wanted to," she replied, with the mother's smile, and we were introduced to the shadow of a young man leaning heavily on the shoulder of a bearded Punjabi Mohammedan.

"That is all that came home of him," said his father to me. "There was nothing in it of the child with whom I had journeyed to Dalhousie centuries since."

"And what is this uniform?" Stalky asked of Imam Din, the servant, who came to attention on the marble floor.

"The uniform of the Protectorate troops, Sahib. Though I am the Little Sahib's body-servant, it is not seemly for us white men to be attended by folk dressed altogether as servants."

"And--and you white men wait at table on horseback?" Stalky pointed to the man's spurs.

"These I added for the sake of honour when I came to England," said Imam Din. Adam smiled the ghost of a little smile that I began to remember,

and we put him on the big couch for refreshments. Stalky asked him how much leave he had, and he said "Six months."

"But he'll take another six on medical certificate," said Agnes anxiously. Adam knit his brows.

"You don't want to--eh? I know. Wonder what my second in command is doing." Stalky tugged his moustache, and fell to thinking of his Sikhs.

"Ah!" said the Infant. "I've only a few thousand pheasants to look after. Come along and dress for dinner. We're just ourselves. What flower is your honour's ladyship commanding for the table?"

"Just ourselves?" she said, looking at the crotons in the great hall. "Then let's have marigolds the little cemetery ones."

So it was ordered.

Now, marigolds to us mean hot weather, discomfort, parting, and death. That smell in our nostrils, and Adam's servant in waiting, we naturally fell back more and more on the old slang, recalling at each glass those who had gone before. We did not sit at the big table, but in the bay window overlooking the park, where they were carting the last of the hay. When twilight fell we would not have candles, but waited for the moon, and continued our talk in the dusk that makes one remember.

Young Adam was not interested in our past except where it had touched his future. I think his mother held his hand beneath the table. Imam Din--shoeless, out of respect to the floors--brought him his medicine, poured it drop by drop, and asked for orders.

"Wait to take him to his cot when he grows weary," said his mother, and Imam Din retired into the shadow by the ancestral portraits.

"Now what d'you expect to get out of your country?" the Infant asked, when--our India laid aside we talked Adam's Africa. It roused him at once.

"Rubber--nuts--gums--and so on," he said. "But our real future is cotton. I grew fifty acres of it last year in my District."

"My District!" said his father. "Hear him, Mummy!"

"I did though! I wish I could show you the sample. Some Manchester chaps said it was as good as any Sea Island cotton on the market."

"But what made you a cotton-planter, my son?" she asked.

"My Chief said every man ought to have a shouk (a hobby) of sorts, and he took the trouble to ride a day out of his way to show me a belt of black soil that was just the thing for cotton."

"Ah! What was your Chief like?" Stalky asked, in his silkiest tones.

"The best man alive--absolutely. He lets you blow your own nose yourself. The people call him"--Adam jerked out some heathen phrase--"that means the Man with the Stone Eyes, you know."

"I'm glad of that. Because I've heard from other quarters" Stalky's sentence burned like a slow match, but the explosion was not long delayed. "Other quarters!" Adam threw out a thin hand. "Every dog has his fleas. If you listen to them, of course!" The shake of his head was as I remembered it among his father's policemen twenty years before, and his mother's eyes shining through the dusk called on me to adore it. I kicked Stalky on the shin. One must not mock a young man's first love or loyalty.

A lump of raw cotton appeared on the table.

"I thought there might be a need. Therefore I packed it between our shirts," said the voice of Imam Din.

"Does he know as much English as that?" cried the Infant, who had forgotten his East.

We all admired the cotton for Adam's sake, and, indeed, it was very long and glossy.

"It's--it's only an experiment," he said. "We're such awful paupers we can't even pay for a mailcart in my District. We use a biscuit-box

on two bicycle wheels. I only got the money for that"--he patted the stuff--"by a pure fluke."

"How much did it cost?" asked Strickland.

"With seed and machinery--about two hundred pounds. I had the labour done by cannibals."

"That sounds promising." Stalky reached for a fresh cigarette.

"No, thank you," said Agnes. "I've been at Weston-super-Mare a little too long for cannibals. I'll go to the music-room and try over next Sunday's hymns."

She lifted the boy's hand lightly to her lips, and tripped across the acres of glimmering floor to the music-room that had been the Infant's ancestors' banqueting hall. Her grey and silver dress disappeared under the musicians' gallery; two electrics broke out, and she stood backed against the lines of gilded pipes.

"There's an abominable self-playing attachment here!" she called.

"Me!" the Infant answered, his napkin on his shoulder. "That's how I play Parsifal."

"I prefer the direct expression. Take it away, Ipps."

We heard old Ipps skating obediently all over the floor.

"Now for the direct expression," said Stalky, and moved on the Burgundy recommended by the faculty to enrich fever-thinned blood.

"It's nothing much. Only the belt of cotton-soil my chief showed me ran right into the Sheshaheli country. We haven't been able to prove cannibalism against that tribe in the courts; but when a Sheshaheli offers you four pounds of woman's breast, tattoo marks and all, skewered up in a plantain leaf before breakfast, you--"

"Naturally burn the villages before lunch," said Stalky.

Adam shook his head. "No troops," he sighed. "I told my Chief about it, and he said we must wait till they chopped a white man. He advised me if ever I felt like it not to commit a--a barren felo de se, but to let the Sheshaheli do it. Then he could report, and then we could mop 'em up!"

"Most immoral! That's how we got--" Stalky quoted the name of a province won by just such a sacrifice.

"Yes, but the beasts dominated one end of my cotton-belt like anything. They chivied me out of it when I went to take soil for analysis--me and Imam Din."

"Sahib! Is there a need?" The voice came out of the darkness, and the eyes shone over Adam's shoulder ere it ceased.

"None. The name was taken in talk." Adam abolished him with a turn of the finger. "I couldn't make a casus belli of it just then, because my Chief had taken all the troops to hammer a gang of slave kings up north. Did you ever hear of our war against Ibn Makarraah? He precious nearly lost us the Protectorate at one time, though he's an ally of ours now."

"Wasn't he rather a pernicious brute, even as they go?" said Stalky.
"Wade told me about him last year."

"Well, his nickname all through the country was 'The Merciful,' and he didn't get that for nothing. None of our people ever breathed his proper name. They said 'He' or 'That One,' and they didn't say it aloud, either. He fought us for eight months."

"I remember. There was a paragraph about it in one of the papers," I said.

"We broke him, though. No--the slavers don't come our way, because our men have the reputation of dying too much, the first month after they're captured. That knocks down profits, you see."

"What about your charming friends, the Sheshahelis?" said the Infant.

"There's no market for Sheshaheli. People would as soon buy crocodiles. I believe, before we annexed the country, Ibn Makarraah dropped down on

'em once--to train his young men--and simply hewed 'em in pieces. The bulk of my people are agriculturists just the right stamp for cotton-growers. What's Mother playing?--'Once in royal?'

The organ that had been crooning as happily as a woman over her babe restored, steadied to a tune.

"Magnificent! Oh, magnificent!" said the Infant loyally. I had never heard him sing but once, and then, though it was early in the tolerant morning, his mess had rolled him into a lotus pond.

"How did you get your cannibals to work for you?" asked Strickland.

"They got converted to civilization after my Chief smashed Ibn Makarra--just at the time I wanted 'em. You see my Chief had promised me in writing that if I could scrape up a surplus he would not bag it for his roads this time, but I might have it for my cotton game. I only needed two hundred pounds. Our revenues didn't run to it."

"What is your revenue?" Stalky asked in the vernacular.

"With hut-tax, traders' game and mining licenses, not more than fourteen thousand rupees; every penny of it ear-marked months ahead." Adam sighed.

"Also there is a fine for dogs straying in the Sahib's camp. Last year it exceeded three rupees," Imam Din said quietly.

"Well, I thought that was fair. They howled so. We were rather strict on fines. I worked up my native clerk--Bulaki Ram--to a ferocious pitch of enthusiasm. He used to calculate the profits of our cotton-scheme to three points of decimals, after office. I tell you I envied your magistrates here hauling money out of motorists every week I had managed to make our ordinary revenue and expenditure just about meet, and I was crazy to get the odd two hundred pounds for my cotton. That sort of thing grows on a chap when he's alone--and talks aloud!"

"Hul-lo! Have you been there already?" the father said, and Adam nodded.

"Yes. Used to spout what I could remember of 'Marmion' to a tree, sir.

Well then my luck turned. One evening an English-speaking nigger came in towing a corpse by the feet. (You get used to little things like that.) He said he'd found it, and please would I identify, because if it was one of Ibn Makarra's men there might be a reward. It was an old Mohammedan, with a strong dash of Arab--a smallboned, bald-headed chap, and I was just wondering how it had kept so well in our climate when it sneezed. You ought to have seen the nigger! He fetched a howl and bolted like--like the dog in 'Tom Sawyer,' when he sat on the what's-its-name beetle. He yelped as he ran, and the corpse went on sneezing. I could see it had been sarkied. (That's a sort of gum-poison, pater, which attacks the nerve centres. Our chief medical officer is writing a monograph about it.) So Imam Din and I emptied out the corpse one time, with my shaving soap and trade gunpowder, and hot water.

"I'd seen a case of sarkie before; so when the skin peeled off his feet, and he stopped sneezing, I knew he'd live. He was bad, though; lay like a log for a week while Imam Din and I massaged the paralysis out of him. Then he told us he was a Hajji--had been three times to Mecca--come in from French Africa, and that he'd met the nigger by the wayside--just like a case of thuggee, in India--and the nigger had poisoned him. That seemed reasonable enough by what I knew of Coast niggers."

"You believed him?" said his father keenly.

"There was no reason I shouldn't. The nigger never came back, and the old man stayed with me for two months," Adam returned. "You know what the best type of a Mohammedan gentleman can be, pater? He was that."

"None finer, none finer," was the answer.

"Except a Sikh," Stalky grunted.

"He'd been to Bombay; he knew French Africa inside out; he could quote poetry and the Koran all day long. He played chess--you don't know what that meant to me--like a master. We used to talk about the regeneration of Turkey and the Sheik-ul-Islam between moves. Oh, everything under the sun we talked about! He was awfully open-minded. He believed in slavery, of course, but he quite saw that it would have to die out. That's why he agreed with me about developing the resources of the district by cotton-growing, you know."

"You talked of that too?" said Strickland.

"Rather. We discussed it for hours. You don't know what it meant to me. A wonderful man. Imam Din, was not our Hajji marvellous?"

"Most marvellous! It was all through the Hajji that we found the money for our cotton-play." Imam Din had moved, I fancy, behind Strickland's chair.

"Yes. It must have been dead against his convictions too. He brought me news when I was down with fever at Dupe that one of Ibn Makarra's men was parading through my District with a bunch of slaves--in the Fork!"

"What's the matter with the Fork, that you can't abide it?" said Stalky. Adam's voice had risen at the last word.

"Local etiquette, sir," he replied, too earnest to notice Stalky's atrocious pun. "If a slaver runs slaves through British territory he ought to pretend that they're his servants. Hawkin' 'em about in the Fork--the forked stick that you put round their necks, you know--is insolence--same as not backing your topsails in the old days. Besides, it unsettles the District."

"I thought you said slavers didn't come your way," I put in.

"They don't. But my Chief was smoking 'em out of the North all that season, and they were bolting into French territory any road they could find. My orders were to take no notice so long as they circulated, but open slave-dealing in the Fork, was too much. I couldn't go myself, so I told a couple of our Makalali police and Imam Din to make talk with the gentleman one time. It was rather risky, and it might have been expensive, but it turned up trumps. They were back in a few days with the slaver (he didn't show fight) and a whole crowd of witnesses, and we tried him in my bedroom, and fined him properly. Just to show you how demoralized the brute must have been (Arabs often go dotty after a defeat), he'd snapped up four or five utterly useless Sheshaheli, and was offering 'em to all and sundry along the road. Why, he offered 'em to you, didn't he, Imam Din?"

"I was witness that he offered man-eaters' for sale," said Imam Din.

"Luckily for my cotton-scheme, that landed, him both ways. You see, he had slaved and exposed slaves for sale in British territory. That meant the double fine if I could get it out of him."

"What was his defence?" said Strickland, late of the Punjab Police.

"As far as I remember--but I had a temperature of 104 degrees at the time--he'd mistaken the meridians of longitude. Thought he was in French territory. Said he'd never do it again, if we'd let him off with a fine. I could have shaken hands with the brute for that. He paid up cash like a motorist and went off one time."

"Did you see him?"

"Ye-es. Didn't I, Imam Din?"

"Assuredly the Sahib both saw and spoke to the slaver. And the Sahib also made a speech to the man-eaters when he freed them, and they swore to supply him with labour for all his cotton-play. The Sahib leaned on his own servant's shoulder the while."

"I remember something of that. I remember Bulaki Ram giving me the papers to sign, and I distinctly remember him locking up the money in the safe--two hundred and ten beautiful English sovereigns. You don't know what that meant to me! I believe it cured my fever; and as soon as I could, I staggered off with the Hajji to interview the Sheshaheli about labour. Then I found out why they had been so keen to work! It wasn't gratitude. Their big village had been hit by lightning and burned out a week or two before, and they lay flat in rows around me asking me for a job. I gave it 'em."

"And so you were very happy?" His mother had stolen up behind us. "You liked your cotton, dear?" She tidied the lump away.

"By Jove, I was happy!" Adam yawned. "Now if any one," he looked at the Infant, "cares to put a little money into the scheme, it'll be the making of my District. I can't give you figures, sir, but I assure--"

"You'll take your arsenic, and Imam Din'll take you up to bed, and I'll come and tuck you in."

Agnes leaned forward, her rounded elbows on his shoulders, hands joined across his dark hair, and "Isn't he a darling?" she said to us, with just the same heart-rending lift to the left eyebrow and the same break of her voice as sent Strickland mad among the horses in the year '84. We were quiet when they were gone. We waited till Imam Din returned to us from above and coughed at the door, as only dark-hearted Asia can.

"Now," said Strickland, "tell us what truly befell, son of my servant."

"All befell as our Sahib has said. Only--only there was an arrangement--a little arrangement on account of his cotton-play."

"Tell! Sit! I beg your pardon, Infant," said Strickland.

But the Infant had already made the sign, and we heard Imam Din hunker down on the floor: One gets little out of the East at attention.

"When the fever came on our Sahib in our roofed house at Dupe," he began, "the Hajji listened intently to his talk. He expected the names of women; though I had already told him that Our virtue was beyond belief or compare, and that Our sole desire was this cotton-play. Being at last convinced, the Hajji breathed on our Sahib's forehead, to sink into his brain news concerning a slave-dealer in his district who had made a mock of the law. Sahib," Imam Din turned to Strickland, "our Sahib answered to those false words as a horse of blood answers to the spur. He sat up. He issued orders for the apprehension of the slavedealer. Then he fell back. Then we left him."

"Alone--servant of my son, and son of my servant?" said his father.

"There was an old woman which belonged to the Hajji. She had come in with the Hajji's money-belt. The Hajji told her that if our Sahib died, she would die with him. And truly our Sahib had given me orders to depart."

"Being mad with fever--eh?"

"What could we do, Sahib? This cotton-play was his heart's desire. He talked of it in his fever. Therefore it was his heart's desire that the Hajji went to fetch. Doubtless the Hajji could have given him money enough out of hand for ten cottonplays; but in this respect also our Sahib's virtue was beyond belief or compare. Great Ones do not exchange moneys. Therefore the Hajji said--and I helped with my counsel--that we must make arrangements to get the money in all respects conformable with the English Law. It was great trouble to us, but--the Law is the Law. And the Hajji showed the old woman the knife by which she would die if our Sahib died. So I accompanied the Hajji."

"Knowing who he was?" said Strickland.

"No! Fearing the man. A virtue went out from him overbearing the virtue of lesser persons. The Hajji told Bulaki Ram the clerk to occupy the seat of government at Dupe till our return. Bulaki Ram feared the Hajji, because the Hajji had often gloatingly appraised his skill in figures at five thousand rupees upon any slave-block. The Hajji then said to me: 'Come, and we will make the man-eaters play the cotton-game for my delight's delight' The Hajji loved our Sahib with the love of a father for his son, of a saved for his saviour, of a Great One for a Great One. But I said: 'We cannot go to that Sheshaheli place without a hundred rifles. We have here five.' The Hajji said: 'I have untied as knot in my head-handkerchief which will be more to us than a thousand.' I saw that he had so loosed it that it lay flagwise on his shoulder. Then I knew that he was a Great One with virtue in him.

"We came to the highlands of the Sheshaheli on the dawn of the second day--about the time of the stirring of the cold wind. The Hajji walked delicately across the open place where their filth is, and scratched upon the gate which was shut. When it opened I saw the man-eaters lying on their cots under the eaves of the huts. They rolled off: they rose up, one behind the other the length of the street, and the fear on their faces was as leaves whitening to a breeze. The Hajji stood in the gate guarding his skirts from defilement. The Hajji said: 'I am here once again. Give me six and yoke up.' They zealously then pushed to us with poles six, and yoked them with a heavy tree. The Hajji then said: 'Fetch fire from the morning hearth, and come to windward.' The wind is strong on those headlands at sunrise, so when each had emptied his crock of fire in front of that which was before him, the broadside of the town

roared into flame, and all went. The Hajji then said: 'At the end of a time there will come here the white man ye once chased for sport. He will demand labour to plant such and such stuff. Ye are that labour, and your spawn after you.' They said, lifting their heads a very little from the edge of the ashes: 'We are that labour, and our spawn after us.' The Hajji said: 'What is also my name?' They said: 'Thy name is also The Merciful' The Hajji said: 'Praise then my mercy'; and while they did this, the Hajji walked away, I following."

The Infant made some noise in his throat, and reached for more Burgundy.

"About noon one of our six fell dead. Fright only frights Sahib! None had--none could--touch him. Since they were in pairs, and the other of the Fork was mad and sang foolishly, we waited for some heathen to do what was needful. There came at last Angari men with goats. The Hajji said: 'What do ye see? They said: 'Oh, our Lord, we neither see nor hear.' The Hajji said: 'But I command ye to see and to hear and to say.' They said: 'Oh, our Lord, it is to our commanded eyes as though slaves stood in a Fork.' The Hajji said: 'So testify before the officer who waits you in the town of Dupe.' They said: 'What shall come to us after?' The Hajji said: 'The just reward for the informer. But if ye do not testify, then a punishment which shall cause birds, to fall from the trees in terror and monkeys to scream for pity.' Hearing this, the Angari men hastened to Dupe. The Hajji then said to me: 'Are those things sufficient to establish our case, or must I drive in a village full?' I said that three witnesses amply established any case, but as yet, I said, the Hajji had not offered his slaves for sale. It is true, as our Sahib said just now, there is one fine for catching slaves, and yet another for making to sell them. And it was the double fine that we needed, Sahib, for our Sahib's cotton-play. We had fore-arranged all this with Bulaki Ram, who knows the English Law, and, I thought the Hajji remembered, but he grew angry, and cried out: 'O God, Refuge of the Afflicted, must I, who am what I am, peddle this dog's meat by the roadside to gain his delight for my heart's delight?' None the less, he admitted it was the English Law, and so he offered me the six--five--in a small voice, with an averted head. The Sheshaheli do not smell of sour milk as heathen should. They smell like leopards, Sahib. This is because they eat men."

"Maybe," said Strickland. "But where were thy wits? One witness is not

sufficient to establish the fact of a sale."

"What could we do, Sahib? There was the Hajji's reputation to consider. We could not have called in a heathen witness for such a thing. And, moreover, the Sahib forgets that the defendant himself was making this case. He would not contest his own evidence. Otherwise, I know the law of evidence well enough.

"So then we went to Dupe, and while Bulaki Ram waited among the Angari men, 'I ran to see our Sahib in bed. His eyes were very bright, and his mouth was full of upside-down orders, but the old woman had not loosened her hair for death. The Hajji said: 'Be quick with my trial. I am not Job!' The Hajji was a learned man. We made the trial swiftly to a sound of soothing voices round the bed. Yet--yet, because no man can be sure whether a Sahib of that blood sees, or does not see, we made it strictly in the manner of the forms of the English Law. Only the witnesses and the slaves and the prisoner we kept without for his nose's sake."

"Then he did not see the prisoner?" said Strickland.

"I stood by to shackle up an Angari in case he should demand it, but by God's favour he was too far fevered to ask for one. It is quite true he signed the papers. It is quite true he saw the money put away in the safe--two hundred and ten English pounds and it is quite true that the gold wrought on him as a strong cure. But as to his seeing the prisoner, and having speech with the man-eaters--the Hajji breathed all that on his forehead to sink into his sick brain. A little, as ye have heard, has remained.... Ah, but when the fever broke, and our Sahib called for the fine-book, and the thin little picture-books from Europe with the pictures of ploughs and hoes, and cotton--mills--ah, then he laughed as he used to laugh, Sahib. It was his heart's desire, this cotton-play. The Hajji loved him, as who does not? It was a little, little arrangement, Sahib, of which--is it necessary to tell all the world?"

"And when didst thou know who the Hajji was?" said Strickland.

"Not for a certainty till he and our Sahib had returned from their visit to the Sheshaheli country. It is quite true as our Sahib says, the man-eaters lay, flat around his feet, and asked for spades to cultivate

cotton. That very night, when I was cooking the dinner, the Hajji said to me: 'I go to my own place, though God knows whether the Man with the Stone Eyes have left me an ox, a slave, or a woman.' I said: 'Thou art then That One?' The Hajji said: 'I am ten thousand rupees reward into thy hand. Shall we make another law-case and get more cotton machines for the boy?' I said: 'What dog am I to do this? May God prolong thy life a thousand years!' The Hajji said: 'Who has seen to-morrow? God has given me as it were a son in my old age, and I praise Him. See that the breed is not lost!'

"He walked then from the cooking-place to our Sahib's office-table under the tree, where our Sahib held in his hand a blue envelope of Service newly come in by runner from the North. At this, fearing evil news for the Hajji, I would have restrained him, but he said: 'We be both Great Ones. Neither of us will fail.' Our Sahib looked up to invite the Hajji to approach before he opened the letter, but the Hajji stood off till our Sahib had well opened and well read the letter. Then the Hajji said: 'Is it permitted to say farewell?' Our Sahib stabbed the letter on the file with a deep and joyful breath and cried a welcome. The Hajji said: 'I go to my own place,' and he loosed from his neck a chained heart of ambergris set in soft gold and held it forth. Our Sahib snatched it swiftly in the closed fist, down turned, and said 'If thy name be written hereon, it is needless, for a name is already engraved on my heart.' The Hajji said: 'And on mine also is a name engraved; but there is no name on the amulet.' The Hajji stooped to our Sahib's feet, but our Sahib raised and embraced him, and the Hajji covered his mouth with his shoulder-cloth, because it worked, and so he went away."

"And what order was in the Service letter?" Stalky murmured.

"Only an order for our Sahib to write a report on some new cattle sickness. But all orders come in the same make of envelope. We could not tell what order it might have been."

"When he opened the letter--my son--made he no sign? A cough? An oath?" Strickland asked.

"None, Sahib. I watched his hands. They did not shake. Afterward he wiped his face, but he was sweating before from the heat."

"Did he know? Did he know who the Hajji was?" said the Infant in English.

"I am a poor man. Who can say what a Sahib of that get knows or does not know? But the Hajji is right. The breed should not be lost. It is not very hot for little children in Dupe, and as regards nurses, my sister's cousin at Jull--"

"H'm! That is the boy's own concern. I wonder if his Chief ever knew?" said Strickland.

"Assuredly," said Imam Din. "On the night before our Sahib went down to the sea, the Great Sahib--the Man with the Stone Eyes--dined with him in his camp, I being in charge of the table. They talked a long while and the Great Sahib said: 'What didst thou think of That One?' (We do not say Ibn Makarrah yonder.) Our Sahib said: 'Which one?' The Great Sahib said: 'That One which taught thy man-eaters to grow cotton for thee. He was in thy District three months to my certain knowledge, and I looked by every runner that thou wouldst send me in his head.' Our Sahib said: 'If his head had been needed, another man should have been appointed to govern my District, for he was my friend.' The Great Sahib laughed and said: 'If I had needed a lesser man in thy place be sure I would have sent him, as, if I had needed the head of That One, be sure I would have sent men to bring it to me. But tell me now, by what means didst thou twist him to thy use and our profit in this cotton-play?' Our Sahib said: 'By God, I did not use that man in any fashion whatever. He was my friend.' The Great Sahib said: 'Toh Vac! (Bosh!) Tell!' Our Sahib shook his head as he does--as he did when a child--and they looked at each other like sword-play men in the ring at a fair. The Great Sahib dropped his eyes first and he said: 'So be it. I should perhaps have answered thus in my youth. No matter. I have made treaty with That One as an ally of the State. Some day he shall tell me the tale.' Then I brought in fresh coffee, and they ceased. But I do not think That One will tell the Great Sahib more than our Sahib told him."

"Wherefore?" I asked.

"Because they are both Great Ones, and I have observed in my life that Great Ones employ words very little between each other in their dealings; still less when they speak to a third concerning those

dealings. Also they profit by silence.... Now I think that the mother has come down from the room, and I will go rub his feet till he sleeps."

His ears had caught Agnes's step at the stair-head and presently she passed us on her way to the music room humming the Magnificat.



THE CALL OF THE TAME

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *Strictly Business*, by O. Henry

When the inauguration was accomplished--the proceedings were made smooth by the presence of the Rough Riders--it is well known that a herd of those competent and loyal ex-warriors paid a visit to the big city. The newspaper reporters dug out of their trunks the old broad-brimmed hats and leather belts that they wear to North Beach fish fries, and mixed with the visitors. No damage was done beyond the employment of the wonderful plural "tenderfeet" in each of the scribe's stories. The Westerners mildly contemplated the skyscrapers as high as the third story, yawned at Broadway, hunched down in the big chairs in hotel corridors, and altogether looked as bored and dejected as a member of Ye Ancient and Honorable Artillery separated during a sham battle from his valet.

Out of this sightseeing delegations of good King Teddy's Gentlemen of the Royal Bear-hounds dropped one Greenbrier Nye, of Pin Feather, Ariz.

The daily cyclone of Sixth Avenue's rush hour swept him away from the company of his pardners true. The dust from a thousand rustling skirts filled his eyes. The mighty roar of trains rushing across the sky deafened him. The lightning-flash of twice ten hundred beaming eyes confused his vision.

The storm was so sudden and tremendous that Greenbrier's first impulse

was to lie down and grab a root. And then he remembered that the disturbance was human, and not elemental; and he backed out of it with a grin into a doorway.

The reporters had written that but for the wide-brimmed hats the West was not visible upon these gauchos of the North. Heaven sharpen their eyes! The suit of black diagonal, wrinkled in impossible places; the bright blue four-in-hand, factory tied; the low, turned-down collar, pattern of the days of Seymour and Blair, white glazed as the letters on the window of the open-day-and-night-except-Sunday restaurants; the out-curve at the knees from the saddle grip; the peculiar spread of the half-closed right thumb and fingers from the stiff hold upon the circling lasso; the deeply absorbed weather tan that the hottest sun of Cape May can never equal; the seldom-winking blue eyes that unconsciously divided the rushing crowds into fours, as though they were being counted out of a corral; the segregated loneliness and solemnity of expression, as of an Emperor or of one whose horizons have not intruded upon him nearer than a day's ride--these brands of the West were set upon Greenbrier Nye. Oh, yes; he wore a broad-brimmed hat, gentle reader--just like those the Madison Square Post Office mail carriers wear when they go up to Bronx Park on Sunday afternoons.

Suddenly Greenbrier Nye jumped into the drifting herd of metropolitan cattle, seized upon a man, dragged him out of the stream and gave him a buffet upon his collar-bone that sent him reeling against a wall.

The victim recovered his hat, with the angry look of a New Yorker who has suffered an outrage and intends to write to the Trib. about it. But he looked at his assailant, and knew that the blow was in consideration of love and affection after the manner of the West, which greets its friends with contumely and uproar and pounding fists, and receives its enemies in decorum and order, such as the judicious placing of the welcoming bullet demands.

"God in the mountains!" cried Greenbrier, holding fast to the foreleg of his cull. "Can this be Longhorn Merritt?"

The other man was--oh, look on Broadway any day for the pattern--business man--latest rolled-brim derby--good barber, business, digestion and tailor.

"Greenbrier Nye!" he exclaimed, grasping the hand that had smitten him. "My dear fellow! So glad to see you! How did you come to--oh, to be sure--the inaugural ceremonies--I remember you joined the Rough Riders. You must come and have luncheon with me, of course."

Greenbrier pinned him sadly but firmly to the wall with a hand the size, shape and color of a McClellan saddle.

"Longy," he said, in a melancholy voice that disturbed traffic, "what have they been doing to you? You act just like a citizen. They done made you into an inmate of the city directory. You never made no such Johnny Branch execration of yourself as that out on the Gila. 'Come and have lunching with me!' You never defined grub by any such terms of reproach in them days."

"I've been living in New York seven years," said Merritt. "It's been eight since we punched cows together in Old Man Garcia's outfit. Well, let's go to a café, anyhow. It sounds good to hear it called 'grub' again."

They picked their way through the crowd to a hotel, and drifted, as by a natural law, to the bar.

"Speak up," invited Greenbrier.

"A dry Martini," said Merritt.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Greenbrier; "and yet me and you once saw the same pink Gila monsters crawling up the walls of the same hotel in Cañon Diablo! A dry--but let that pass. Whiskey straight--and they're on you."

Merritt smiled, and paid.

They lunched in a small extension of the dining room that connected with the café. Merritt dexterously diverted his friend's choice, that hovered over ham and eggs, to a purée of celery, a salmon cutlet, a partridge pie and a desirable salad.

"On the day," said Greenbrier, grieved and thunderous, "when I can't

hold but one drink before eating when I meet a friend I ain't seen in eight years at a 2 by 4 table in a thirty-cent town at 1 o'clock on the third day of the week, I want nine broncos to kick me forty times over a 640-acre section of land. Get them statistics?"

"Right, old man," laughed Merritt. "Waiter, bring an absinthe frappé and--what's yours, Greenbrier?"

"Whiskey straight," mourned Nye. "Out of the neck of a bottle you used to take it, Longy--straight out of the neck of a bottle on a galloping pony--Arizona redeye, not this ab--oh, what's the use? They're on you."

Merritt slipped the wine card under his glass.

"All right. I suppose you think I'm spoiled by the city. I'm as good a Westerner as you are, Greenbrier; but, somehow, I can't make up my mind to go back out there. New York is comfortable--comfortable. I make a good living, and I live it. No more wet blankets and riding herd in snowstorms, and bacon and cold coffee, and blowouts once in six months for me. I reckon I'll hang out here in the future. We'll take in the theatre to-night, Greenbrier, and after that we'll dine at--"

"I'll tell you what you are, Merritt," said Greenbrier, laying one elbow in his salad and the other in his butter. "You are a concentrated, effete, unconditional, short-sleeved, gotch-eared Miss Sally Walker. God made you perpendicular and suitable to ride straddle and use cuss words in the original. Wherefore you have suffered his handiwork to elapse by removing yourself to New York and putting on little shoes tied with strings, and making faces when you talk. I've seen you rope and tie a steer in 42 1/2. If you was to see one now you'd write to the Police Commissioner about it. And these flapdoodle drinks that you inoculate your system with--these little essences of cowslip with acorns in 'em, and paregoric flip--they ain't anyways in assent with the cordiality of manhood. I hate to see you this way."

"Well, Mr. Greenbrier," said Merritt, with apology in his tone, "in a way you are right. Sometimes I do feel like I was being raised on the bottle. But, I tell you, New York is comfortable--comfortable. There's something about it--the sights and the crowds, and the way it changes every day, and the very air of it that seems to tie a one-mile-long

stake rope around a man's neck, with the other end fastened somewhere about Thirty-fourth Street. I don't know what it is."

"God knows," said Greenbrier sadly, "and I know. The East has gobbled you up. You was venison, and now you're veal. You put me in mind of a japonica in a window. You've been signed, sealed and diskivered. Requiescat in hoc signo. You make me thirsty."

"A green chartreuse here," said Merritt to the waiter.

"Whiskey straight," sighed Greenbrier, "and they're on you, you renegade of the round-ups."

"Guilty, with an application for mercy," said Merritt. "You don't know how it is, Greenbrier. It's so comfortable here that--"

"Please loan me your smelling salts," pleaded Greenbrier. "If I hadn't seen you once bluff three bluffers from Mazatzal City with an empty gun in Phoenix--"

Greenbrier's voice died away in pure grief.

"Cigars!" he called harshly to the waiter, to hide his emotion.

"A pack of Turkish cigarettes for mine," said Merritt.

"They're on you," chanted Greenbrier, struggling to conceal his contempt.

At seven they dined in the Where-to-Dine-Well column.

That evening a galaxy had assembled there. Bright shone the lights o'er fair women and br--let it go, anyhow--brave men. The orchestra played charmingly. Hardly had a tip from a diner been placed in its hands by a waiter when it would burst forth into soniferousness. The more beer you contributed to it the more Meyerbeer it gave you. Which is reciprocity.

Merritt put forth exertions on the dinner. Greenbrier was his old friend, and he liked him. He persuaded him to drink a cocktail.

"I take the horehound tea," said Greenbrier, "for old times' sake. But I'd prefer whiskey straight. They're on you."

"Right!" said Merritt. "Now, run your eye down that bill of fare and see if it seems to hitch on any of these items."

"Lay me on my lava bed!" said Greenbrier, with bulging eyes. "All these specimens of nutriment in the grub wagon! What's this? Horse with the heaves? I pass. But look along! Here's truck for twenty round-ups all spelled out in different directions. Wait till I see."

The viands ordered, Merritt turned to the wine list.

"This Medoc isn't bad," he suggested.

"You're the doc," said Greenbrier. "I'd rather have whiskey straight. It's on you."

Greenbrier looked around the room. The waiter brought things and took dishes away. He was observing. He saw a New York restaurant crowd enjoying itself.

"How was the range when you left the Gila?" asked Merritt.

"Fine," said Greenbrier. "You see that lady in the red speckled silk at that table. Well, she could warm over her beans at my campfire. Yes, the range was good. She looks as nice as a white mustang I see once on Black River."

When the coffee came, Greenbrier put one foot on the seat of the chair next to him.

"You said it was a comfortable town, Longy," he said, meditatively. "Yes, it's a comfortable town. It's different from the plains in a blue norther. What did you call that mess in the crock with the handle, Longy? Oh, yes, squabs in a cash roll. They're worth the roll. That white mustang had just such a way of turning his head and shaking his mane--look at her, Longy. If I thought I could sell out my ranch at a fair price, I believe I'd--

"Gyar--song!" he suddenly cried, in a voice that paralyzed every knife and fork in the restaurant.

The waiter dived toward the table.

"Two more of them cocktail drinks," ordered Greenbrier.

Merritt looked at him and smiled significantly.

"They're on me," said Greenbrier, blowing a puff of smoke to the ceiling.



The Project Gutenberg EBook of **THE TREE OF LIFE**, by Catherine Lucille Moore

Over time-ruined Illar the searching planes swooped and circled. Northwest Smith, peering up at them with a steel-pale stare from the shelter of a half-collapsed temple, thought of vultures wheeling above carrion. All day long now they had been raking these ruins for him. Presently, he knew, thirst would begin to parch his throat and hunger to gnaw at him. There was neither food nor water in these ancient Martian ruins, and he knew that it could be only a matter of time before the urgencies of his own body would drive him out to signal those wheeling Patrol ships and trade his hard-won liberty for food and drink. He crouched lower under the shadow of the temple arch and cursed the accuracy of the Patrol gunner whose flame-blast had caught his dodging ship just at the edge of Illar's ruins.

Presently it occurred to him that in most Martian temples of the ancient days an ornamental well had stood in the outer court for the benefit of wayfarers. Of course all water in it would be a million years dry now, but for lack of anything better to do he rose from his seat at the edge of the collapsed central dome and made his cautious way by still intact corridors toward the front of the temple. He paused in a tangle of wreckage at the courtyard's edge and looked out across the sun-drenched

expanse of pavement toward that ornate well that once had served travelers who passed by here in the days when Mars was a green planet.

It was an unusually elaborate well, and amazingly well preserved. Its rim had been inlaid with a mosaic pattern whose symbolism must once have borne deep meaning, and above it in a great fan of time-defying bronze an elaborate grille-work portrayed the inevitable tree-of-life pattern which so often appears in the symbolism of the three worlds. Smith looked at it a bit incredulously from his shelter, it was so miraculously preserved amidst all this chaos of broken stone, casting a delicate tracery of shadow on the sunny pavement as perfectly as it must have done a million years ago when dusty travelers paused here to drink. He could picture them filing in at noontime through the great gates that----

The vision vanished abruptly as his questing eyes made the circle of the ruined walls. There had been no gate. He could not find a trace of it anywhere around the outer wall of the court. The only entrance here, as nearly as he could tell from the foundations that remained, had been the door in whose ruins he now stood. Queer. This must have been a private court, then, its great grille-crowned well reserved for the use of the priests. Or wait--had there not been a priest-king Illar after whom the city was named? A wizard-king, so legend said, who ruled temple as well as palace with an iron hand. This elaborately patterned well, of material royal enough to withstand the weight of ages, might well have been sacrosanct for the use of that long-dead monarch. It might----

* * * * *

Across the sun-bright pavement swept the shadow of a plane. Smith dodged back into deeper hiding while the ship circled low over the courtyard. And it was then, as he crouched against a crumbled wall and waited, motionless, for the danger to pass, that he became aware for the first time of a sound that startled him so he could scarcely credit his ears--a recurrent sound, choked and sorrowful--the sound of a woman sobbing.

The incongruity of it made him forgetful for a moment of the peril hovering overhead in the sun-hot outdoors. The dimness of the temple ruins became a living and vital place for that moment, throbbing with

the sound of tears. He looked about half in incredulity, wondering if hunger and thirst were playing tricks on him already, or if these broken halls might be haunted by a million-years-old sorrow that wept along the corridors to drive its hearers mad. There were tales of such haunters in some of Mars' older ruins. The hair prickled faintly at the back of his neck as he laid a hand on the butt of his force-gun and commenced a cautious prowling toward the source of the muffled noise.

Presently he caught a flash of white, luminous in the gloom of these ruined walls, and went forward with soundless steps, eyes narrowed in the effort to make out what manner of creature this might be that wept alone in time-forgotten ruins. It was a woman. Or it had the dim outlines of a woman, huddled against an angle of fallen walls and veiled in a fabulous shower of long dark hair. But there was something uncannily odd about her. He could not focus his pale stare upon her outlines. She was scarcely more than a luminous blot of whiteness in the gloom, shimmering with a look of unreality which the sound of her sobs denied.

* * * *

Before he could make up his mind just what to do, something must have warned the weeping girl that she was no longer alone, for the sound of her tears checked suddenly and she lifted her head, turning to him a face no more distinguishable than her body's outlines. He made no effort to resolve the blurred features into visibility, for out of that luminous mask burned two eyes that caught his with an almost perceptible impact and gripped them in a stare from which he could not have turned if he would.

They were the most amazing eyes he had ever met, colored like moonstone, milkily translucent, so that they looked almost blind. And that magnetic stare held him motionless. In the instant that she gripped him with that fixed, moonstone look he felt oddly as if a tangible bond were taut between them.

Then she spoke, and he wondered if his mind, after all, had begun to give way in the haunted loneliness of dead Illar; for though the words she spoke fell upon his ears in a gibberish of meaningless sounds, yet in his brain a message formed with a clarity that far transcended the

halting communication of words. And her milkily colored eyes bored into his with a fierce intensity.

"I'm lost--I'm lost----" wailed the voice in his brain.

A rush of sudden tears brimmed the compelling eyes, veiling their brilliance. And he was free again with that clouding of the moonstone surfaces. Her voice wailed, but the words were meaningless and no knowledge formed in his brain to match them. Stiffly he stepped back a pace and looked down at her, a feeling of helpless incredulity rising within him. For he still could not focus directly upon the shining whiteness of her, and nothing save those moonstone eyes were clear to him.

The girl sprang to her feet and rose on tiptoe, gripping his shoulders with urgent hands. Again the blind intensity of her eyes took hold of his, with a force almost as tangible as the clutch of her hands; again that stream of intelligence poured into his brain, strongly, pleadingly.

"Please, please take me back! I'm so frightened--I can't find my way--oh, please!"

He blinked down at her, his dazed mind gradually realizing the basic facts of what was happening. Obviously her milky, unseeing eyes held a magnetic power that carried her thoughts to him without the need of a common speech. And they were the eyes of a powerful mind, the outlets from which a stream of fierce energy poured into his brain. Yet the words they conveyed were the words of a terrified and helpless girl. A strong sense of wariness was rising in him as he considered the incongruity of speech and power, both of which were beating upon him more urgently with every breath. The mind of a forceful and strong-willed woman, carrying the sobs of a frightened girl. There was no sincerity in it.

"Please, please!" cried her impatience in his brain. "Help me! Guide me back!"

"Back where?" he heard his own voice asking.

"The Tree!" wailed that queer speech in his brain, while gibberish was

all his ears heard and the moonstone stare transfixed him strongly. "The Tree of Life! Oh, take me back to the shadow of the Tree!"

A vision of the grille-ornamented well leaped into his memory. It was the only tree symbol he could think of just then. But what possible connection could there be between the well and the lost girl--if she was lost? Another wail in that unknown tongue, another anguished shake of his shoulders, brought a sudden resolution into his groping mind. There could be no harm in leading her back to the well, to whose grille she must surely be referring. And strong curiosity was growing in his mind. Much more than met the eye was concealed in this queer incident. And a wild guess had flashed through his mind that perhaps she might have come from some subterranean world into which the well descended. It would explain her luminous pallor, if not her blurriness; and, too, her eyes did not seem to function in the light. There was a much more incredible explanation of her presence, but he was not to know it for a few minutes yet.

"Come along," he said, taking the clutching hands gently from his shoulders. "I'll lead you to the well."

She sighed in a deep gust of relief and dropped her compelling eyes from his, murmuring in that strange, gabbling tongue what must have been thanks. He took her by the hand and turned toward the ruined archway of the door.

Against his fingers her flesh was cool and firm. To the touch she was tangible, but even thus near, his eyes refused to focus upon the cloudy opacity of her body, the dark blur of her streaming hair. Nothing but those burning, blinded eyes were strong enough to pierce the veil that parted them.

She stumbled along at his side over the rough floor of the temple, saying nothing more, panting with eagerness to return to her incomprehensible "tree." How much of that eagerness was assumed Smith still could not be quite sure. When they reached the door he halted her for a moment, scanning the sky for danger. Apparently the ships had finished with this quarter of the city, for he could see two or three of them half a mile away, hovering low over Illar's northern section. He could risk it without much peril. He led the girl cautiously out into

the sun-hot court.

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She could not have known by sight that they neared the well, but when they were within twenty paces of it she flung up her blurred head suddenly and tugged at his hand. It was she who led him that last stretch which parted the two from the well. In the sun the shadow tracery of the grille's symbolic pattern lay vividly outlined on the ground. The girl gave a little gasp of delight. She dropped his hand and ran forward three short steps, and plunged into the very center of that shadowy pattern on the ground. And what happened then was too incredible to believe.

The pattern ran over her like a garment, curving to the curve of her body in the way all shadows do. But as she stood there striped and laced with the darkness of it, there came a queer shifting in the lines of black tracery, a subtle, inexplicable movement to one side. And with that motion she vanished. It was exactly as if that shifting had moved her out of one world into another. Stupidly Smith stared at the spot from which she had disappeared.

Then several things happened almost simultaneously. The zoom of a plane broke suddenly into the quiet, a black shadow dipped low over the rooftops, and Smith, too late, realized that he stood defenseless in full view of the searching ships. There was only one way out, and that was too fantastic to put faith in, but he had no time to hesitate. With one leap he plunged full into the midst of the shadow of the tree of life.

Its tracery flowed round him, molding its pattern to his body. And outside the boundaries everything executed a queer little sidewise dip and slipped in the most extraordinary manner, like an optical illusion, into quite another scene. There was no intervention of blankness. It was as if he looked through the bars of a grille upon a picture which without warning slipped sidewise, while between the bars appeared another scene, a curious, dim landscape, gray as if with the twilight of early evening. The air had an oddly thickened look, through which he saw the quiet trees and the flower-spangled grass of the place with a queer, unreal blending, like the landscape in a tapestry, all its outlines

blurred.

In the midst of this tapestried twilight the burning whiteness of the girl he had followed blazed like a flame. She had paused a few steps away and stood waiting, apparently quite sure that he would come after. He grinned a little to himself as he realized it, knowing that curiosity must almost certainly have driven him in her wake even if the necessity for shelter had not compelled his following.

She was clearly visible now, in this thickened dimness--visible, and very lovely, and a little unreal. She shone with a burning clarity, the only vivid thing in the whole twilit world. Eyes upon that blazing whiteness, Smith stepped forward, scarcely realizing that he had moved.

Slowly he crossed the dark grass toward her. That grass was soft under-foot, and thick with small, low-blooming flowers of a shining pallor. Botticelli painted such spangled swards for the feet of his angels. Upon it the girl's bare feet gleamed whiter than the blossoms. She wore no garment but the royal mantle of her hair, sweeping about her in a cloak of shining darkness that had a queer, unreal tinge of purple in that low light. It brushed her ankles in its fabulous length. From the hood of it she watched Smith coming toward her, a smile on her pale mouth and a light blazing in the deeps of her moonstone eyes. She was not blind now, nor frightened. She stretched out her hand to him confidently.

"It is my turn now to lead you," she smiled. As before, the words were gibberish, but the penetrating stare of those strange white eyes gave them a meaning in the depths of his brain.

Automatically his hand went out to hers. He was a little dazed, and her eyes were very compelling. Her fingers twined in his and she set off over the flowery grass, pulling him beside her. He did not ask where they were going. Lost in the dreamy spell of the still, gray, enchanted place, he felt no need for words. He was beginning to see more clearly in the odd, blurring twilight that ran the outlines of things together in that queer, tapestried manner. And he puzzled in a futile, muddled way as he went on over what sort of land he had come into. Overhead was darkness, paling into twilight near the ground, so that when he looked up he was staring into bottomless deeps of starless night.

Trees and flowering shrubs and the flower-starred grass stretched emptily about them in the thick, confusing gloom of the place. He could see only a little distance through that dim air. It was as if they walked a strip of tapestried twilight in some unlighted dream. And the girl, with her lovely, luminous body and richly colored robe of hair was like a woman in a tapestry too, unreal and magical.

After a while, when he had become a little adjusted to the queerness of the whole scene, he began to notice furtive movements in the shrubs and trees they passed. Things flickered too swiftly for him to catch their outlines, but from the tail of his eye he was aware of motion, and somehow of eyes that watched. That sensation was a familiar one to him, and he kept an uneasy gaze on those shiftings in the shrubbery as they went on. Presently he caught a watcher in full view between bush and tree, and saw that it was a man, a little, furtive, dark-skinned man who dodged hastily back into cover again before Smith's eyes could do more than take in the fact of his existence.

After that he knew what to expect and could make them out more easily: little, darting people with big eyes that shone with a queer, sorrowful darkness from their small, frightened faces as they scuttled through the bushes, dodging always just out of plain sight among the leaves. He could hear the soft rustle of their passage, and once or twice when they passed near a clump of shrubbery he thought he caught the echo of little whispering calls, gentle as the rustle of leaves and somehow full of a strange warning note so clear that he caught it even amid the murmur of their speech. Warning calls, and little furtive hidings in the leaves, and a landscape of tapestried blurring carpeted with Botticelli flower-strewn sward. It was all a dream. He felt quite sure of that.

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It was a long while before curiosity awakened in him sufficiently to make him break the stillness. But at last he asked dreamily,

"Where are we going?"

The girl seemed to understand that without the necessity of the bond her hypnotic eyes made, for she turned and caught his eyes in a white stare

and answered,

"To Thag. Thag desires you."

"What is Thag?"

In answer to that she launched without preliminary upon a little singsong monolog of explanation whose stereotyped formula made him faintly uneasy with the thought that it must have been made very often to attain the status of a set speech; made to many men, perhaps, whom Thag had desired. And what became of them afterward? he wondered. But the girl was speaking.

"Many ages ago there dwelt in Illar the great King Illar for whom the city was named. He was a magician of mighty power, but not mighty enough to fulfill all his ambitions. So by his arts he called up out of darkness the being known as Thag, and with him struck a bargain. By that bargain Thag was to give of his limitless power, serving Illar all the days of Illar's life, and in return the king was to create a land for Thag's dwelling-place and people it with slaves and furnish a priestess to tend Thag's needs. This is that land. I am that priestess, the latest of a long line of women born to serve Thag. The tree-people are his--his lesser servants.

"I have spoken softly so that the tree-people do not hear, for to them Thag is the center and focus of creation, the end and beginning of all life. But to you I have told the truth."

"But what does Thag want of me?"

"It is not for Thag's servants to question Thag."

"Then what becomes, afterward, of the men Thag desires?" he pursued.

"You must ask Thag that."

She turned her eyes away as she spoke, snapping the mental bond that had flowed between them with a suddenness that left Smith dizzy. He went on at her side more slowly, pulling back a little on the tug of her fingers. By degrees the sense of dreaminess was fading, and alarm began

to stir in the deeps of his mind. After all, there was no reason why he need let this blank-eyed priestess lead him up to the very maw of her god. She had lured him into this land by what he knew now to have been a trick; might she not have worse tricks than that in store for him?

She held him, after all, by nothing stronger than the clasp of her fingers, if he could keep his eyes turned from hers. Therein lay her real power, but he could fight it if he chose. And he began to hear more clearly than ever the queer note of warning in the rustling whispers of the tree-folk who still fluttered in and out of sight among the leaves. The twilight place had taken on menace and evil.

Suddenly he made up his mind. He stopped, breaking the clasp of the girl's hand.

"I'm not going," he said.

She swung round in a sweep of richly tinted hair, words jetting from her in a gush of incoherence. But he dared not meet her eyes, and they conveyed no meaning to him. Resolutely he turned away, ignoring her voice, and set out to retrace the way they had come. She called after him once, in a high, clear voice that somehow held a note as warning as that in the rustling voices of the tree-people, but he kept on doggedly, not looking back. She laughed then, sweetly and scornfully, a laugh that echoed uneasily in his mind long after the sound of it had died upon the twilit air.

After a while he glanced back over one shoulder, half expecting to see the luminous dazzle of her body still glowing in the dim glade where he had left her; but the blurred tapestry-landscape was quite empty.

He went on in the midst of a silence so deep it hurt his ears, and in a solitude unhaunted even by the shy presences of the tree-folk. They had vanished with the fire-bright girl, and the whole twilight land was empty save for himself. He plodded on across the dark grass, crushing the upturned flower-faces under his boots and asking himself wearily if he could be mad. There seemed little other explanation for this hushed and tapestried solitude that had swallowed him up. In that thunderous quiet, in that deathly solitude, he went on.

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When he had walked for what seemed to him much longer than it should have taken to reach his starting-point, and still no sign of an exit appeared, he began to wonder if there were any way out of the gray land of Thag. For the first time he realized that he had come through no tangible gateway. He had only stepped out of a shadow, and now that he thought of it--there were no shadows here. The grayness swallowed everything up, leaving the landscape oddly flat, like a badly drawn picture. He looked about helplessly, quite lost now and not sure in what direction he should be facing, for there was nothing here by which to know directions. The trees and shrubs and the starry grass still stretched about him, uncertainly outlined in that changeless dusk. They seemed to go on for ever.

But he plodded ahead, unwilling to stop because of a queer tension in the air, somehow as if all the blurred trees and shrubs were waiting in breathless anticipation, centering upon his stumbling figure. But all trace of animate life had vanished with the disappearance of the priestess' white-glowing figure. Head down, paying little heed to where he was going, he went on over the flowery sward.

An odd sense of voids about him startled Smith at last out of his lethargic plodding. He lifted his head. He stood just at the edge of a line of trees, dim and indistinct in the unchanging twilight. Beyond them--he came to himself with a jerk and stared incredulously. Beyond them the grass ran down to nothingness, merging by imperceptible degrees into a streaked and arching void--not the sort of emptiness into which a material body could fall, but a solid nothing, curving up toward the dark zenith as the inside of a sphere curves. No physical thing could have entered there. It was too utterly void, an inviolable emptiness which no force could invade.

He stared up along the inward arch of that curving, impassable wall. Here, then, was the edge of the queer land Illar had wrested out of space itself. This arch must be the curving of solid space which had been bent awry to enclose the magical land. There was no escape this way. He could not even bring himself to approach any nearer to that streaked and arching blank. He could not have said why, but it woke in him an inner disquiet so strong that after a moment's staring he turned

his eyes away.

Presently he shrugged and set off along the inside of the line of trees which parted him from the space-wall. Perhaps there might be a break somewhere. It was a forlorn hope, but the best that offered. Wearily he stumbled on over the flowery grass.

How long he had gone on along that almost imperceptibly curving line of border he could not have said, but after a timeless interval of gray solitude he gradually became aware that a tiny rustling and whispering among the leaves had been growing louder by degrees for some time. He looked up. In and out among the trees which bordered that solid wall of nothingness little, indistinguishable figures were flitting. The tree-men had returned. Queerly grateful for their presence, he went on a bit more cheerfully, paying no heed to their timid dartings to and fro, for Smith was wise in the ways of wild life.

Presently, when they saw how little heed he paid them, they began to grow bolder, their whispers louder. And among those rustling voices he thought he was beginning to catch threads of familiarity. Now and again a word reached his ears that he seemed to recognize, lost amidst the gibberish of their speech. He kept his head down and his hands quiet, plodding along with a cunning stillness that began to bear results.

From the corner of his eye he could see that a little dark tree-man had darted out from cover and paused midway between bush and tree to inspect the queer, tall stranger. Nothing happened to this daring venturer, and soon another risked a pause in the open to stare at the quiet walker among the trees. In a little while a small crowd of the tree-people was moving slowly parallel with his course, staring with all the avid curiosity of wild things at Smith's plodding figure. And among them the rustling whispers grew louder.

Presently the ground dipped down into a little hollow ringed with trees. It was a bit darker here than it had been on the higher level, and as he went down the slope of its side he saw that among the underbrush which filled it were cunningly hidden huts twined together out of the living bushes. Obviously the hollow was a tiny village where the tree-folk dwelt.

He was surer of this when they began to grow bolder as he went down into the dimness of the place. The whispers shrilled a little, and the boldest among his watchers ran almost at his elbow, twittering their queer, broken speech in hushed syllables whose familiarity still bothered him with its haunting echo of words he knew. When he had reached the center of the hollow he became aware that the little folk had spread out in a ring to surround him. Wherever he looked their small, anxious faces and staring eyes confronted him. He grinned to himself and came to a halt, waiting gravely.

None of them seemed quite brave enough to constitute himself spokesman, but among several a hurried whispering broke out in which he caught the words "Thag" and "danger" and "beware." He recognized the meaning of these words without placing in his mind their origins in some tongue he knew. He knit his sun-bleached brows and concentrated harder, striving to wrest from that curious, murmuring whisper some hint of its original root. He had a smattering of more tongues than he could have counted offhand, and it was hard to place these scattered words among any one speech.

But the word "Thag" had a sound like that of the very ancient dryland tongue, which upon Mars is considered at once the oldest and the most uncouth of all the planet's languages. And with that clue to guide him he presently began to catch other syllables which were remotely like syllables from the dryland speech. They were almost unrecognizable, far, far more ancient than the very oldest versions of the tongue he had ever heard repeated, almost primitive in their crudity and simplicity. And for a moment the sheerest awe came over him, as he realized the significance of what he listened to.

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The dryland race today is a handful of semi-brutes, degenerate from the ages of past time when they were a mighty people at the apex of an almost forgotten glory. That day is millions of years gone now, too far in the past to have record save in the vaguest folklore. Yet here was a people who spoke the rudiments of that race's tongue as it must have been spoken in the race's dim beginnings, perhaps a million years earlier even than that immemorial time of their triumph. The reeling of millenniums set Smith's mind awl with the effort at compassing their

span.

There was another connotation in the speaking of that tongue by these timid bush-dwellers, too. It must mean that the forgotten wizard king, Illar, had peopled his sinister, twilight land with the ancestors of today's dryland dwellers. If they shared the same tongue they must share the same lineage. And humanity's remorseless adaptability had done the rest.

It had been no kinder here than in the outside world, where the ancient plains-men who had roamed Mars' green prairies had dwindled with their dying plains, degenerating at last into a shrunken, leather-skinned bestiality. For here that same race root had declined into these tiny, slinking creatures with their dusky skins and great, staring eyes and their voices that never rose above a whisper. What tragedies must lie behind that gradual degeneration!

All about him the whispers still ran. He was beginning to suspect that through countless ages of hiding and murmuring those voices must have lost the ability to speak aloud. And he wondered with a little inward chill what terror it was which had transformed a free and fearless people into these tiny wild things whispering in the underbrush.

The little anxious voices had shrilled into vehemence now, all of them chattering together in their queer, soft, rustling whispers. Looking back later upon that timeless space he had passed in the hollow, Smith remembered it as some curious nightmare--dimness and tapestried blurring, and a hush like death over the whole twilight land, and the timid voices whispering, whispering, eloquent with terror and warning.

He groped back among his memories and brought forth a phrase or two remembered from long ago, an archaic rendering of the immemorial tongue they spoke. It was the simplest version he could remember of the complex speech now used, but he knew that to them it must sound fantastically strange. Instinctively he whispered as he spoke it, feeling like an actor in a play as he mouthed the ancient idiom,

"I--I cannot understand. Speak--more slowly----"

A torrent of words greeted this rendering of their tongue. Then there

was a great deal of hushing and hissing, and presently two or three between them began laboriously to recite an involved speech, one syllable at a time. Always two or more shared the task. Never in his converse with them did he address anyone directly. Ages of terror had bred all directness out of them.

"Thag," they said. "Thag, the terrible--Thag, the omnipotent--Thag, the unescapable. Beware of Thag."

For a moment Smith stood quiet, grinning down at them despite himself. There must not be too much of intelligence left among this branch of the race, either, for surely such a warning was superfluous. Yet they had mastered their agonies of timidity to give it. All virtue could not yet have been bred out of them, then. They still had kindness and a sort of desperate courage rooted deep in fear.

"What is Thag?" he managed to inquire, voicing the archaic syllables uncertainly. And they must have understood the meaning if not the phraseology, for another spate of whispered tumult burst from the clustering tribe. Then, as before, several took up the task of answering.

"Thag--Thag, the end and the beginning, the center of creation. When Thag breathes the world trembles. The earth was made for Thag's dwelling-place. All things are Thag's. Oh, beware! Beware!"

This much he pieced together out of their diffuse whisperings, catching up the fragments of words he knew and fitting them into the pattern.

"What--what is the danger?" he managed to ask.

"Thag--hungers. Thag must be fed. It is we who--feed--him, but there are times when he desires other food than us. It is then he sends his priestess forth to lure--food--in. Oh, beware of Thag!"

"You mean then, that she--the priestess--brought me in for--food?"

A chorus of grave, murmuring affirmatives.

"Then why did she leave me?"

"There is no escape from Thag. Thag is the center of creation. All things are Thag's. When he calls, you must answer. When he hungers, he will have you. Beware of Thag!"

Smith considered that for a moment in silence. In the main he felt confident that he had understood their warning correctly, and he had little reason to doubt that they knew whereof they spoke. Thag might not be the center of the universe, but if they said he could call a victim from anywhere in the land, Smith was not disposed to doubt it. The priestess' willingness to let him leave her unhindered, yes, even her scornful laughter as he looked back, told the same story. Whatever Thag might be, his power in this land could not be doubted. He made up his mind suddenly what he must do, and turned to the breathlessly waiting little folk.

"Which way--lies Thag?" he asked.

A score of dark, thin arms pointed. Smith turned his head speculatively toward the spot they indicated. In this changeless twilight all sense of direction had long since left him, but he marked the line as well as he could by the formation of the trees, then turned to the little people with a ceremonious farewell rising to his lips.

"My thanks for----" he began, to be interrupted by a chorus of whispering cries of protest. They seemed to sense his intention, and their pleadings were frantic. A panic anxiety for him glowed upon every little terrified face turned up to his, and their eyes were wide with protest and terror. Helplessly he looked down.

"I--I must go," he tried stumblingly to say. "My only chance is to take Thag unawares, before he sends for me."

He could not know if they understood. Their chattering went on undiminished, and they even went so far as to lay tiny hands on him, as if they would prevent him by force from seeking out the terror of their lives.

"No, no, no!" they wailed murmurously. "You do not know what it is you seek! You do not know Thag! Stay here! Beware of Thag!"

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A little prickling of unease went down Smith's back as he listened. That must be very terrible indeed if even half this alarm had foundation. And to be quite frank with himself, he would greatly have preferred to remain here in the hidden quiet of the hollow, with its illusion of shelter, for as long as he was allowed to stay. But he was not of the stuff that yields very easily to its own terrors, and hope burned strongly in him still. So he squared his broad shoulders and turned resolutely in the direction the tree-folk had indicated.

When they saw that he meant to go, their protests sank to a wail of bitter grieving. With that sound moaning behind him he went up out of the hollow, like a man setting forth to the music of his own dirge. A few of the bravest went with him a little way, flitting through the underbrush and darting from tree to tree in a timidity so deeply ingrained that even when no immediate peril threatened they dared not go openly through the twilight.

Their presence was comforting to Smith as he went on. A futile desire to help the little terror-ridden tribe was rising in him, a useless gratitude for their warning and their friendliness, their genuine grieving at his departure and their odd, paradoxical bravery even in the midst of hereditary terror. But he knew that he could do nothing for them, when he was not at all sure he could even save himself. Something of their panic had communicated itself to him, and he advanced with a sinking at the pit of his stomach. Fear of the unknown is so poignant a thing, feeding on its own terror, that he found his hands beginning to shake a little and his throat going dry as he went on.

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The rustling and whispering among the bushes dwindled as his followers one by one dropped away, the bravest staying the longest, but even they failing in courage as Smith advanced steadily in that direction from which all their lives they had been taught to turn their faces. Presently he realized that he was alone once more. He went on more quickly, anxious to come face to face with this horror of the twilight and dispel at least the fearfulness of its mystery.

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The silence was like death. Not a breeze stirred the leaves, and the only sound was his own breathing, the heavy thud of his own heart. Somehow he felt sure that he was coming nearer to his goal. The hush seemed to confirm it. He loosened the force-gun at his thigh.

In that changeless twilight the ground was sloping down once more into a broader hollow. He descended slowly, every sense alert for danger, not knowing if Thag was beast or human or elemental, visible or invisible. The trees were beginning to thin. He knew that he had almost reached his goal.

He paused at the edge of the last line of trees. A clearing spread out before him at the bottom of the hollow, quiet in the dim, translucent air. He could focus directly upon no outlines anywhere, for the tapestried blurring of the place. But when he saw what stood in the very center of the clearing he stopped dead-still, like one turned to stone, and a shock of utter cold went chilling through him. Yet he could not have said why.

For in the clearing's center stood the Tree of Life. He had met the symbol too often in patterns and designs not to recognize it, but here that fabulous thing was living, growing, actually springing up from a rooted firmness in the spangled grass as any tree might spring. Yet it could not be real. Its thin brown trunk, of no recognizable substance, smooth and gleaming, mounted in the traditional spiral; its twelve fantastically curving branches arched delicately outward from the central stem. It was bare of leaves. No foliage masked the serpentine brown spiral of the trunk. But at the tip of each symbolic branch flowered a blossom of bloody rose so vivid he could scarcely focus his dazzled eyes upon them.

This tree alone of all objects in the dim land was sharply distinct to the eye--terribly distinct, remorselessly clear. No words can describe the amazing menace that dwelt among its branches. Smith's flesh crept as he stared, yet he could not for all his staring make out why peril was so eloquent there. To all appearances here stood only a fabulous symbol miraculously come to life; yet danger breathed out from it so strongly

that Smith felt the hair lifting on his neck as he stared.

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It was no ordinary danger. A nameless, choking, paralyzed panic was swelling in his throat as he gazed upon the perilous beauty of the Tree. Somehow the arches and curves of its branches seemed to limn a pattern so dreadful that his heart beat faster as he gazed upon it. But he could not guess why, though somehow the answer was hovering just out of reach of his conscious mind. From that first glimpse of it his instincts shuddered like a shying stallion, yet reason still looked in vain for an answer.

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Nor was the Tree merely a vegetable growth. It was alive, terribly, ominously alive. He could not have said how he knew that, for it stood motionless in its empty clearing, not a branch trembling, yet in its immobility more awfully vital than any animate thing. The very sight of it woke in Smith an insane urging to flight, to put worlds between himself and this inexplicably dreadful thing.

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Crazy impulses stirred in his brain, coming to insane birth at the calling of the Tree's peril--the desperate need to shut out the sight of that thing that was blasphemy, to put out his own sight rather than gaze longer upon the perilous grace of its branches, to slit his own throat that he might not need to dwell in the same world which housed so frightful a sight as the Tree.

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All this was a mad battering in his brain. The strength of him was enough to isolate it in a far corner of his consciousness, where it seethed and shrieked half heeded while he turned the cool control which the spaceways life had taught him to the solution of this urgent question. But even so his hand was moist and shaking on his gun-butt, and the breath rasped in his dry throat.

Why--he asked himself in a determined groping after steadiness--should the mere sight of a tree, even so fabulous a one as this, rouse that insane panic in the gazer? What peril could dwell invisibly in a tree so frightful that the living horror of it could drive a man mad with the very fact of its unseen presence? He clenched his teeth hard and stared resolutely at that terrible beauty in the clearing, fighting down the sick panic that rose in his throat as his eyes forced themselves to dwell upon the Tree.

Gradually the revulsion subsided. After a nightmare of striving he mustered the strength to force it down far enough to allow reason's entry once more. Sternly holding down that frantic terror under the surface of consciousness, he stared resolutely at the Tree. And he knew that this was Thag.

It could be nothing else, for surely two such dreadful things could not dwell in one land. It must be Thag, and he could understand now the immemorial terror in which the tree-folk held it, but he did not yet grasp in what way it threatened them physically. The inexplicable dreadfulness of it was a menace to the mind's very existence, but surely a rooted tree, however terrible to look at, could wield little actual danger.

As he reasoned, his eyes were seeking restlessly among the branches, searching for the answer to their dreadfulness. After all, this thing wore the aspect of an old pattern, and in that pattern there was nothing dreadful. The tree of life had made up the design upon that well-top in Illar through whose shadow he had entered here, and nothing in that bronze grille-work had roused terror. Then why----? What living menace dwelt invisibly among these branches to twist them into curves of horror?

A fragment of old verse drifted through his mind as he stared in perplexity:

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

And for the first time the true significance of a "fearful symmetry" broke upon him. Truly a more than human agency must have arched these

subtle curves so delicately into dreadfulness, into such an awful beauty that the very sight of it made those atavistic terrors he was so sternly holding down leap in a gibbering terror.

A tremor rippled over the Tree. Smith froze rigid, staring with startled eyes. No breath of wind had stirred through the clearing, but the Tree was moving with a slow, serpentine grace, writhing its branches leisurely in a horrible travesty of voluptuous enjoyment. And upon their tips the blood-red flowers were spreading like cobra's hoods, swelling and stretching their petals out and glowing with a hue so eye-piercingly vivid that it transcended the bounds of color and blazed forth like pure light.

But it was not toward Smith that they stirred. They were arching out from the central trunk toward the far side of the clearing. After a moment Smith tore his eyes away from the indescribably dreadful flexibility of those branches and looked to see the cause of their writhing.

A blaze of luminous white had appeared among the trees across the clearing. The priestess had returned. He watched her pacing slowly toward the Tree, walking with a precise and delicate grace as liquidly lovely as the motion of the Tree. Her fabulous hair swung down about her in a swaying robe that rippled at every step away from the moon-white beauty of her body. Straight toward the Tree she paced, and all the blossoms glowed more vividly at her nearness, the branches stretching toward her, rippling with eagerness.

Priestess though she was, he could not believe that she was going to come within touch of that Tree the very sight of which roused such a panic instinct of revulsion in every fiber of him. But she did not swerve or slow in her advance. Walking delicately over the flowery grass, arrogantly luminous in the twilight, so that her body was the center and focus of any landscape she walked in, she neared her horribly eager god.

Now she was under the Tree, and its trunk had writhed down over her and she was lifting her arms like a girl to her lover. With a gliding slowness the flame-tipped branches slid round her. In that incredible embrace she stood immobile for a long moment, the Tree arching down with

all its curling limbs, the girl straining upward, her head thrown back and the mantle of her hair swinging free of her body as she lifted her face to the quivering blossoms. The branches gathered her closer in their embrace. Now the blossoms arched near, curving down all about her, touching her very gently, twisting their blazing faces toward the focus of her moon-white body. One poised directly above her face, trembled, brushed her mouth lightly. And the Tree's tremor ran unbroken through the body of the girl it clasped.

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The incredible dreadfulness of that embrace was suddenly more than Smith could bear. All his terrors, crushed down with so stern a self-control, without warning burst all bounds and rushed over him in a flood of blind revulsion. A whimper choked up in his throat and quite involuntarily he swung round and plunged into the shielding trees, hands to his eyes in a futile effort to blot out the sight of lovely horror behind him whose vividness was burnt upon his very brain.

Heedlessly he blundered through the trees, no thought in his terror-blank mind save the necessity to run, run, run until he could run no more. He had given up all attempt at reason and rationality; he no longer cared why the beauty of the Tree was so dreadful. He only knew that until all space lay between him and its symmetry he must run and run and run.

What brought that frenzied madness to an end he never knew. When sanity returned to him he was lying face down on the flower-spangled sward in a silence so deep that his ears ached with its heaviness. The grass was cool against his cheek. For a moment he fought the back-flow of knowledge into his emptied mind. When it came, the memory of that horror he had fled from, he started up with a wild thing's swiftness and glared around pale-eyed into the unchanging dusk. He was alone. Not even a rustle in the leaves spoke of the tree-folk's presence.

For a moment he stood there alert, wondering what had roused him, wondering what would come next. He was not left long in doubt. The answer was shrilling very, very faintly through that aching quiet, an infinitesimally tiny, unthinkable far-away murmur which yet pierced his ear-drums with the sharpness of tiny needles. Breathless, he strained in

listening. Swiftly the sound grew louder. It deepened upon the silence, sharpened and shrilled until the thin blade of it was vibrating in the center of his innermost brain.

And still it grew, swelling louder and louder through the twilight world in cadences that were rounding into a queer sort of music and taking on such an unbearable sweetness that Smith pressed his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to shut the sound away. He could not. It rang in steadily deepening intensities through every fiber of his being, piercing him with thousands of tiny music-blades that quivered in his very soul with intolerable beauty. And he thought he sensed in the piercing strength of it a vibration of queer, unnamable power far mightier than anything ever generated by man, the dim echo of some cosmic dynamo's hum.

* * * * *

The sound grew sweeter as it strengthened, with a queer, inexplicable sweetness unlike any music he had ever heard before, rounder and fuller and more complete than any melody made up of separate notes. Stronger and stronger he felt the certainty that it was the song of some mighty power, humming and throbbing and deepening through the twilight until the whole dim land was one trembling reservoir of sound that filled his entire consciousness with its throbbing, driving out all other thoughts and realizations, until he was no more than a shell that vibrated in answer to the calling.

For it was a calling. No one could listen to that intolerable sweetness without knowing the necessity to seek its source. Remotely in the back of his mind Smith remembered the tree-folk's warning, "When Thag calls, you must answer." Not consciously did he recall it, for all his consciousness was answering the siren humming in the air, and, scarcely realizing that he moved, he had turned toward the source of that calling, stumbling blindly over the flowery sward with no thought in his music-brimmed mind but the need to answer that lovely, power-vibrant summoning.

Past him as he went on moved other shapes, little and dark-skinned and ecstatic, gripped like himself in the hypnotic melody. The tree-folk had forgotten even their inbred fear at Thag's calling, and walked boldly

through the open twilight, lost in the wonder of the song.

Smith went on with the rest, deaf and blind to the land around him, alive to one thing only, that summons from the siren tune. Unrealizingly, he retraced the course of his frenzied flight, past the trees and bushes he had blundered through, down the slope that led to the Tree's hollow, through the thinning of the underbrush to the very edge of the last line of foliage which marked the valley's rim.

* * * * *

By now the calling was so unbearably intense, so intolerably sweet that somehow in its very strength it set free a part of his dazed mind as it passed the limits of audible things and soared into ecstasies which no senses bound. And though it gripped him ever closer in its magic, a sane part of his brain was waking into realization. For the first time alarm came back into his mind, and by slow degrees the world returned about him. He stared stupidly at the grass moving by under his pacing feet. He lifted a dragging head and saw that the trees no longer rose about him, that a twilight clearing stretched away on all sides toward the forest rim which circled it, that the music was singing from some source so near that--that----

The Tree! Terror leaped within him like a wild thing. The Tree, quivering with unbearable clarity in the thick, dim air, writhed above him, blossoms blazing with bloody radiance and every branch vibrant and undulant to the tune of that unholy song. Then he was aware of the lovely, luminous whiteness of the priestess swaying forward under the swaying limbs, her hair rippling back from the loveliness of her as she moved.

Choked and frenzied with unreasoning terror, he mustered every effort that was in him to turn, to run again like a mad-man out of that dreadful hollow, to hide himself under the weight of all space from the menace of the Tree. And all the while he fought, all the while panic drummed like mad in his brain, his relentless body plodded on straight toward the hideous loveliness of that siren singer towering above him. From the first he had felt subconsciously that it was Thag who called, and now, in the very center of that ocean of vibrant power, he knew. Gripped in the music's magic, he went on.

All over the clearing other hypnotized victims were advancing slowly, with mechanical steps and wide, frantic eyes as the tree-folk came helplessly to their god's calling. He watched a group of little, dusky sacrifices pace step by step nearer to the Tree's vibrant branches. The priestess came forward to meet them with outstretched arms. He saw her take the foremost gently by the hands. Unbelieving, hypnotized with horrified incredulity, he watched her lead the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous Tree whose limbs yearned downward like hungry snakes, the great flowers glowing with avid color.

[Illustration: "The priestess led the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous tree."]

He saw the branches twist out and lengthen toward the sacrifice, quivering with eagerness. Then with a tiger's leap they darted, and the victim was swept out of the priestess' guiding hands up into the branches that darted round like tangled snakes in a clot that hid him for an instant from view. Smith heard a high, shuddering wail ripple out from that knot of struggling branches, a dreadful cry that held such an infinity of purest horror and understanding that he could not but believe that Thag's victims in the moment of their doom must learn the secret of his horror. After that one frightful cry came silence. In an instant the limbs fell apart again from emptiness. The little savage had melted like smoke among their writhing, too quickly to have been devoured, more as if he had been snatched into another dimension in the instant the hungry limbs hid him. Flame-tipped, avid, they were dipping now toward another victim as the priestess paced serenely forward.

* * * * *

And still Smith's rebellious feet were carrying him on, nearer and nearer the writhing peril that towered over his head. The music shrilled like pain. Now he was so close that he could see the hungry flower-mouths in terrible detail as they faced round toward him. The limbs quivered and poised like cobras, reached out with a snakish lengthening, down inexorably toward his shuddering helplessness. The priestess was turning her calm white face toward his.

* * * * *

Those arcs and changing curves of the branches as they neared were sketching lines of pure horror whose meaning he still could not understand, save that they deepened in dreadfulness as he neared. For the last time that urgent wonder burned up in his mind why--_why_ so simple a thing as this fabulous Tree should be infused with an indwelling terror strong enough to send his innermost soul frantic with revulsion. For the last time--because in that trembling instant as he waited for their touch, as the music brimmed up with unbearable, brain-wrenching intensity, in that one last moment before the flower-mouths seized him--he saw. He understood.

* * * * *

With eyes opened at last by the instant's ultimate horror, he saw the real Thag. Dimly he knew that until now the thing had been so frightful that his eyes had refused to register its existence, his brain to acknowledge the possibility of such dreadfulness. It had literally been too terrible to see, though his instinct knew the presence of infinite horror. But now, in the grip of that mad, hypnotic song, in the instant before unbearable terror enfolded him, his eyes opened to full sight, and he saw.

That Tree was only Thag's outline, sketched three-dimensionally upon the twilight. Its dreadfully curving branches had been no more than Thag's barest contours, yet even they had made his very soul sick with intuitive revulsion. But now, seeing the true horror, his mind was too numb to do more than register its presence: Thag, hovering monstrously between earth and heaven, billowing and surging up there in the translucent twilight, tethered to the ground by the Tree's bending stem and reaching ravenously after the hypnotized fodder that his calling brought helpless into his clutches. One by one he snatched them up, one by one absorbed them into the great, unseeable horror of his being. That, then, was the reason why they vanished so instantaneously, sucked into the concealing folds of a thing too dreadful for normal eyes to see.

The priestess was pacing forward. Above her the branches arched and leaned. Caught in a timeless paralysis of horror, Smith stared upward into the enormous bulk of Thag while the music hummed intolerably in his

shrinking brain--Thag, the monstrous thing from darkness, called up by Illar in those long-forgotten times when Mars was a green planet. Foolishly his brain wandered among the ramifications of what had happened so long ago that time itself had forgotten, refusing to recognize the fate that was upon himself. He knew a tingle of respect for the ages-dead wizard who had dared command a being like this to his services--this vast, blind, hovering thing, ravenous for human flesh, indistinguishable even now save in those terrible outlines that sent panic leaping through him with every motion of the Tree's fearful symmetry.

* * * * *

All this flashed through his dazed mind in the one blinding instant of understanding. Then the priestess' luminous whiteness swam up before his hypnotized stare. Her hands were upon him, gently guiding his mechanical footsteps, very gently leading him forward into--into----

* * * * *

The writhing branches struck downward, straight for his face. And in one flashing leap the moment's infinite horror galvanized him out of his paralysis. Why, he could not have said. It is not given to many men to know the ultimate essentials of all horror, concentrated into one fundamental unit. To most men it would have had that same paralyzing effect up to the very instant of destruction. But in Smith there must have been a bed-rock of subtle violence, an unyielding, inflexible vehemence upon which the structure of his whole life was reared. Few men have it. And when that ultimate intensity of terror struck the basic flint of him, reaching down through mind and soul into the deepest depths of his being, it struck a spark from that inflexible barbarian buried at the roots of him which had force enough to shock him out of his stupor.

* * * * *

In the instant of release his hand swept like an unloosed spring, of its own volition, straight for the butt of his power-gun. He was dragging it free as the Tree's branches snatched him from its priestess' hands. The fire-colored blossoms burnt his flesh as they closed round him, the hot

branches gripping like the touch of ravenous fingers. The whole Tree was hot and throbbing with a dreadful travesty of fleshly life as it whipped him aloft into the hovering bulk of incarnate horror above.

In the instantaneous upward leap of the flower-tipped limbs Smith fought like a demon to free his gun-hand from the gripping coils. For the first time Thag knew rebellion in his very clutches, and the ecstasy of that music which had dinned in Smith's ears so strongly that by now it seemed almost silence was swooping down a long arc into wrath, and the branches tightened with hot insistency, lifting the rebellious offering into Thag's monstrous, indescribable bulk.

But even as they rose, Smith was twisting in their clutch to maneuver his hand into a position from which he could blast that undulant tree trunk into nothingness. He knew intuitively the futility of firing up into Thag's imponderable mass. Thag was not of the world he knew; the flame blast might well be harmless to that mighty hoverer in the twilight. But at the Tree's root, where Thag's essential being merged from the imponderable to the material, rooting in earthly soil, he should be vulnerable if he were vulnerable at all. Struggling in the tight, hot coils, breathing the nameless essence of horror, Smith fought to free his hand.

The music that had rung so long in his ears was changing as the branches lifted him higher, losing its melody and merging by swift degrees into a hum of vast and vibrant power that deepened in intensity as the limbs drew him upward into Thag's monstrous bulk, the singing force of a thing mightier than any dynamo ever built. Blinded and dazed by the force thundering through every atom of his body, he twisted his hand in one last, convulsive effort, and fired.

He saw the flame leap in a dazzling gush straight for the trunk below. It struck. He heard the sizzle of annihilated matter. He saw the trunk quiver convulsively from the very roots, and the whole fabulous Tree shook once with an ominous tremor. But before that tremor could shiver up the branches to him the hum of the living dynamo which was closing round his body shrilled up arcs of pure intensity into a thundering silence.

Then without a moment's warning the world exploded. So instantaneously

did all this happen that the gun-blast's roar had not yet echoed into silence before a mightier sound than the brain could bear exploded outward from the very center of his own being. Before the awful power of it everything reeled into a shaken oblivion. He felt himself falling....

* * * * *

A queer, penetrating light shining upon his closed eyes roused Smith by degrees into wakefulness again. He lifted heavy lids and stared upward into the unwinking eye of Mars' racing nearer moon. He lay there blinking dazedly for a while before enough of memory returned to rouse him. Then he sat up painfully, for every fiber of him ached, and stared round on a scene of the wildest destruction. He lay in the midst of a wide, rough circle which held nothing but powdered stone. About it, rising raggedly in the moving moonlight, the blocks of time-forgotten Illar loomed.

But they were no longer piled one upon another in a rough travesty of the city they once had shaped. Some force mightier than any of man's explosives seemed to have hurled them with such violence from their beds that their very atoms had been disrupted by the force of it, crumbling them into dust. And in the very center of the havoc lay Smith, unhurt.

He stared in bewilderment about the moonlight ruins. In the silence it seemed to him that the very air still quivered in shocked vibrations. And as he stared he realized that no force save one could have wrought such destruction upon the ancient stones. Nor was there any explosive known to man which would have wrought this strange, pulverizing havoc upon the blocks of Illar. That force had hummed unbearably through the living dynamo of Thag, a force so powerful that space itself had bent to enclose it. Suddenly he realized what must have happened.

Not Illar, but Thag himself had warped the walls of space to enfold the twilight world, and nothing but Thag's living power could have held it so bent to segregate the little, terror-ridden land inviolate.

Then when the Tree's roots parted, Thag's anchorage in the material world failed and in one great gust of unthinkable energy the warped space-walls had ceased to bend. Those arches of solid space had snapped back into their original pattern, hurling the land and all its dwellers

into--into----His mind balked in the effort to picture what must have happened, into what ultimate dimension those denizens must have vanished.

Only himself, enfolded deep in Thag's very essence, the intolerable power of the explosion had not touched. So when the warped space-curve ceased to be, and Thag's hold upon reality failed, he must have been dropped back out of the dissolving folds upon the spot where the Tree had stood in the space-circled world, through that vanished world-floor into the spot he had been snatched from in the instant of the dim land's dissolution. It must have happened after the terrible force of the explosion had spent itself, before Thag dared move even himself through the walls of changing energy into his own far land again.

Smith sighed and lifted a hand to his throbbing head, rising slowly to his feet. What time had elapsed he could not guess, but he must assume that the Patrol still searched for him. Wearily he set out across the circle of havoc toward the nearest shelter which Illar offered. The dust rose in ghostly, moonlit clouds under his feet.



THE "BEMOL" SHOP OF STATIONERY

from: The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The republic of the southern cross and other stories*,
by Valery Brussof

From the life of "one of the least of these."

As soon as Anna Nikolaevna had finished school a place was found for her as saleswoman in the stationery shop "Bemol." [A] Why the shop was called by this name would be difficult to say; probably music had once been sold there. It was situated in a turning off one of the boulevards, had few customers, and Anna Nikolaevna used to spend whole days almost alone. Her only assistant, the boy Fedka, lay down to sleep after morning tea, woke up when it was time to run to the cookshop for dinner, and on his return slept again. In the evening the proprietor, an old

German woman, Carolina Gustavovna, came in for half an hour, collected the takings, and reproached Anna Nikolaevna for her inability to attract customers. Anna Nikolaevna was dreadfully afraid of her and listened to her without daring to utter a word. The shop was closed at nine; Anna Nikolaevna went home to her aunt, drank weak tea with stale biscuits, and went at once to bed.

[A] Russian shops are often given fantastic names which are printed above the windows instead of the names of the owners.

At first Anna Nikolaevna thought she could find distraction in reading. She got as many novels and old magazines as she could, and read them conscientiously through page by page. But she mixed up the names of the heroes in the novels, and she could never understand why they wrote about the various imaginary Jeans and Blanchés, and why they described beautiful mornings, all of them exactly like one another. Reading was for her labour and not relaxation, so she gave up books. Young men did not unduly pester her with their attentions, for they did not find her interesting. If one of the customers stayed too long talking amiabilities to her, she went away into the little room behind the shop and sent Fedka out. If any one tried to speak to her on her way home, she would say no word, but either hasten her steps or just run as fast as she could to her own door. She had no friends, she did not keep up a correspondence with any of her schoolfellows, she only spoke to her aunt about two words a day. And in this way the weeks and months went by.

Then Anna Nikolaevna began to make friends with the world which lay around her--the world of paper, envelopes, postcards, pencils, pens, the world of pictures, pictures in sets, pictures in relief, pictures for cutting out. This world was to her more comprehensible than that of books and was more friendly to her than the world of people. She soon learned to know all the kinds of paper and pens, all the series of postcards, and she named them all instead of calling them by numbers; she began to love some of them and to count others as her enemies. To her favourites she allotted the best places in the shop. She kept the very newest boxes, those with an edging of gold paper, for the writing-paper from a certain factory in Riga having the watermark of a fish. The sets of pictures representing types of ancient Egyptians were arranged in a special drawer in which she kept only these and some penholders with little doves at the end of the holder. The postcards on

which were drawn "The Way to the Stars" she wrapped up separately in rose-coloured paper and sealed them with a wafer like a forget-me-not. But she hated the thick bloated-looking glass inkstands, hated the lined transparent paper which would never keep straight and seemed always to be laughing at her, hated the rolls of crinkled paper for lampshades, proud and sumptuous looking. These things she would hide away in the remotest corner of the shop.

Anna Nikolaevna rejoiced when she sold any of her favourite articles. It was only when her store of this or that kind of thing began to run short that she would get anxious and even dare to beg Carolina Gustavovna to obtain a new supply as soon as possible. Once she unexpectedly got sold out of the parts of the little letter-weights which acted badly and of which she had grown fond because of their misfortune, the proprietor herself sold the last one evening and would not order any more. Anna Nikolaevna wept for two whole days after. When she sold the articles she did not care for she felt vexed. When a customer took whole dozens of ugly exercise books with blue flowers on the covers, or highly coloured postcards with the portraits of actors, it seemed to her that her favourites had been insulted. On such occasions she so stubbornly dissuaded the customers from buying that many of them went out of the shop without purchasing anything at all.

Anna Nikolaevna was convinced that everything in the shop understood her. When she turned over the leaves of the quires of her beloved paper they rustled so welcomingly. When she kissed the little doves on the ends of the penholders they fluttered their little wooden wings. In the quiet wintry days when it was snowing outside the hoar-frosted window-pane with its ugly circles made by the warmth of the lamps, when for whole hours no one came into the shop, she would hold long conversations with all the things standing on the shelves or lying in the drawers and boxes. She would listen to their unuttered speech and exchange smiles and glances with the things she knew. In a rapture she would spread out on the counter her favourite pictures--of angels, flowers, Egyptians--and tell them fairy tales and listen to their stories. Sometimes they all sang to her in a hardly audible chorus, a soothing lullaby. Anna Nikolaevna would listen to this until an entering customer would smile unkindly, thinking he had awakened her from sleep.

Before Christmas Anna Nikolaevna had a bad time. Customers were

unusually frequent. The shop was filled up with a pile of gaudy eye-offending cards, with ugly crackers and gilt Christmas-tree decorations, exposed in flimsy boxes. On the walls hung pull-off calendars with portraits of great men. The shop was full of people and there was no escape from them. But all the summer Anna Nikolaevna had a complete rest. There was hardly any trade, very often the day passed without a copeck being taken. The proprietor went away from Moscow for whole months. In the shop it was dusty and suffocating, but quiet. Anna Nikolaevna distributed her favourite pictures all over the shop, placed her favourite pencils, pens and erasers in the best positions in the glass cases. She cut out narrow ribbons from coloured cigarette-paper and wreathed them round the stiff columns of the cupboards. She spoke in loud whispers to her beloved objects, telling them about her own childhood, about her mother, and weeping as she did so. And it seemed to her that they comforted her. And so months and years went by.

Anna Nikolaevna never dreamed that her life might change. But one autumn day Carolina Gustavovna, having come back to Moscow in a particularly bad and quarrelsome mood, declared that there would be a general stock-taking. The following Sunday a notice was pasted on the door: "This shop is closed to-day." Anna Nikolaevna looked on mournfully while the proprietor's fat fingers turned over the leaves of her best notepaper, those delicate and elegant sheets, crumpling the edges; carelessly flinging on to the counter her cherished penholders with the doves. In the trade-book, where Anna Nikolaevna had written in her timid pale handwriting, the proprietor scrawled rude remarks with flourishes and ink-blots. Carolina Gustavovna found many things missing--whole stacks of paper, some gross of pencils, and various separate articles--a stereoscope, magnifying glasses, frames. Anna Nikolaevna felt sure she had never seen them in the shop. Then Carolina Gustavovna calculated that the takings had been growing less every month. This she brought to the notice of Anna Nikolaevna and blamed her for it, called her a thief, said she had no further use for her services, and dismissed her from her post.

Anna Nikolaevna burst into tears, but did not dare to utter a word of protest. When she got home, of course, she had to listen to her aunt's reproaches, who at first called her a good-for-nothing, and then changed her tone and threatened to prosecute the German woman, saying she couldn't allow her niece to be insulted. But Anna Nikolaevna was not so

much afraid of losing her place nor troubled by the injustice of Carolina Gustavovna; she could not bear to be separated from the beloved things in the shop. She thought of the pictured angels balancing on the clouds, of the heads of Marie Stuart, of the paper bearing the watermark of a fish, of the familiar boxes and drawers, and sobbed unceasingly. She remembered that happy evening hour when the lamps had just been lighted, remembered her silent conversations with her friends and the almost inaudible chorus sounding from the shelves, and her heart was rent with despair. At the thought that never, never should she see her loved ones again, she threw herself down upon her little bed and prayed that she might die.

After about six weeks her aunt was happy to find her a new situation, once more in a stationery shop, but in a much-frequented and busy street. Anna Nikolaevna entered upon her new duties with a pang at her heart. There were two others beside herself in the shop, another girl and a young man. The master also spent the greater part of the day there. There were many customers, for the shop was near several educational institutions. All day Anna Nikolaevna was under the eyes of the others, and they laughed at her and despised her. She did not find her former beloved objects in the new shop. All the things were ordered through other agents from different firms. Paper, pencils, pens—nothing here seemed to be alive. And if there were any things like those in “Bemol,” they did not recognise Anna Nikolaevna and it was useless for her when she had a moment to whisper to them their tenderest names.

The only pleasure she had now was to look in at the windows of her old shop on her way home in the evening, as it closed later than the new one. She gazed through the dusty windowpanes into the well-known room. Behind the counter stood the new saleswoman, a good-looking German girl with her hair in curling-pins. In Fedka’s place was a tall fifteen-year-old lad. Customers came laughing out of the shop, they had found it pleasant inside. But Anna Nikolaevna believed that her friends, the pictures and penholders and exercise books, remembered her and liked it better in the old days, and this belief comforted her.

For a long while Anna Nikolaevna nursed the fancy that she would one day go inside the shop once more and look again on the old cupboards and show-cases, to show her beloved things that she still remembered them. Several times she said to herself that it should be that day, but

changed her mind, being specially afraid of meeting the proprietor. But one evening she saw Carolina Gustavovna come out of the shop and drive away in a cab. This gave her courage. She opened the shop door and entered with a beating heart. The German girl in the curl-papers was preparing a captivating smile, but seeing a lady customer she contented herself with a slight inclination of the head.

“What can I do for you, miss?”

“Give me ... give me ... some note-paper ... a quire ... with the fishes.”

The German girl smiled condescendingly, guessing what was meant, and went to the cupboard. Anna Nikolaevna watched her with distrustful and mournful eyes. In her time this paper had been kept in the box with a gold border. But the box was not there now. In its place there were ugly black drawers labelled No. 4, 20 copecks, Ministry Paper 40 copecks. The best places in the cupboards were occupied by the glass inkstands. A pile of crinkled paper took up the whole of the lower shelf. The postcards with the portraits of actors were arranged fan-wise and fastened here and there on the walls. Everything had been moved, displaced, changed.

The German girl put the paper in front of Anna Nikolaevna, asking her which sort she wanted. Anna Nikolaevna eagerly took into her hands the beautiful sheets which once had responded to her caressing touch, but now they were stiff as death, and as pale. She looked round piteously, everything was dead, everything was deaf and dumb.

“Thirty three copecks to you, miss.”

Even the price was altered. Anna Nikolaevna paid the money and went out of the shop into the cold, holding the roll of paper tightly in her hand. The October wind penetrated her short, well-worn coat. The light of the street lamps was diffused in large blobs in the mist. All was cold and hopeless.



FRIEND PATIENCE

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Maupassant Original Short Stories (180), Complete*,

"What became of Leremy?"

"He is captain in the Sixth Dragoons."

"And Pinson?"

"He's a subprefect."

"And Racollet?"

"Dead."

We were searching for other names which would remind us of the youthful faces of our younger days. Once in a while we had met some of these old comrades, bearded, bald, married, fathers of several children, and the realization of these changes had given us an unpleasant shudder, reminding us how short life is, how everything passes away, how everything changes. My friend asked me:

"And Patience, fat Patience?"

I almost, howled:

"Oh! as for him, just listen to this. Four or five years ago I was in Limoges, on a tour of inspection, and I was waiting for dinner time. I was seated before the big cafe in the Place du Theatre, just bored to death. The tradespeople were coming by twos, threes or fours, to take their absinthe or vermouth, talking all the time of their own or other people's business, laughing loudly, or lowering their voices in order to impart some important or delicate piece of news.

"I was saying to myself: 'What shall I do after dinner?' And I thought of the long evening in this provincial town, of the slow, dreary walk through unknown streets, of the impression of deadly gloom which these provincial people produce on the lonely traveller, and of the whole

oppressive atmosphere of the place.

"I was thinking of all these things as I watched the little jets of gas flare up, feeling my loneliness increase with the falling shadows.

"A big, fat man sat down at the next table and called in a stentorian voice:

"'Waiter, my bitters!'

"The 'my' came out like the report of a cannon. I immediately understood that everything was his in life, and not another's; that he had his nature, by Jove, his appetite, his trousers, his everything, his, more absolutely and more completely than anyone else's. Then he looked round him with a satisfied air. His bitters were brought, and he ordered:

"'My newspaper!'

"I wondered: 'Which newspaper can his be?' The title would certainly reveal to me his opinions, his theories, his principles, his hobbies, his weaknesses.

"The waiter brought the Temps. I was surprised. Why the Temps, a serious, sombre, doctrinaire, impartial sheet? I thought:

"'He must be a serious man with settled and regular habits; in short, a good bourgeois.'

"He put on his gold-rimmed spectacles, leaned back before beginning to read, and once more glanced about him. He noticed me, and immediately began to stare at me in an annoying manner. I was even going to ask the reason for this attention, when he exclaimed from his seat:

"'Well, by all that's holy, if this isn't Gontran Lardois.'

"I answered:

"'Yes, monsieur, you are not mistaken.'

"Then he quickly rose and came toward me with hands outstretched:

"Well, old man, how are you?"

"As I did not recognize him at all I was greatly embarrassed. I stammered:

"Why-very well-and-you?"

"He began to laugh "I bet you don't recognize me."

"No, not exactly. It seems--however--"

"He slapped me on the back:

"Come on, no joking! I am Patience, Robert Patience, your friend, your chum."

"I recognized him. Yes, Robert Patience, my old college chum. It was he. I took his outstretched hand:

"And how are you?"

"Fine!"

"His smile was like a paean of victory.

"He asked:

"What are you doing here?"

"I explained that I was government inspector of taxes.

"He continued, pointing to my red ribbon:

"Then you have-been a success?"

"I answered:

"Fairly so. And you?"

"I am doing well!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm in business."

"Making money?"

"Heaps. I'm very rich. But come around to lunch, to-morrow noon, 17 Rue du Coq-qui-Chante; you will see my place."

"He seemed to hesitate a second, then continued:

"Are you still the good sport that you used to be?"

"I--I hope so."

"Not married?"

"No."

"Good. And do you still love a good time and potatoes?"

"I was beginning to find him hopelessly vulgar. Nevertheless, I answered

"Yes."

"And pretty girls?"

"Most assuredly."

"He began to laugh good-humoredly.

"Good, good! Do you remember our first escapade, in Bordeaux, after that dinner at Routie's? What a spree!"

"I did, indeed, remember that spree; and the recollection of it cheered me up. This called to mind other pranks. He would say:

"Say, do you remember the time when we locked the proctor up in old man Latoque's cellar?"

"And he laughed and banged the table with his fist, and then he continued:

"Yes-yes-yes-and do you remember the face of the geography teacher, M. Marin, the day we set off a firecracker in the globe, just as he was haranguing about the principal volcanoes of the earth?"

"Then suddenly I asked him:

"And you, are you married?"

"He exclaimed:

"Ten years, my boy, and I have four children, remarkable youngsters; but you'll see them and their mother."

"We were talking rather loud; the people around us looked at us in surprise.

"Suddenly my friend looked at his watch, a chronometer the size of a pumpkin, and he cried:

"Thunder! I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you; I am never free at night."

"He rose, took both my hands, shook them as though he were trying to wrench my arms from their sockets, and exclaimed:

"So long, then; till to-morrow noon!"

"So long!"

"I spent the morning working in the office of the collector-general of the Department. The chief wished me to stay to luncheon, but I told him that I had an engagement with a friend. As he had to go out, he accompanied me.

"I asked him:

"Can you tell me how I can find the Rue du Coq-qui-Chante?"

"He answered:

"Yes, it's only five minutes' walk from here. As I have nothing special to do, I will take you there."

"We started out and soon found ourselves there. It was a wide, fine-looking street, on the outskirts of the town. I looked at the houses and I noticed No. 17. It was a large house with a garden behind it. The facade, decorated with frescoes, in the Italian style, appeared to me as being in bad taste. There were goddesses holding vases, others swathed in clouds. Two stone cupids supported the number of the house.

"I said to the treasurer:

"Here is where I am going."

"I held my hand out to him. He made a quick, strange gesture, said nothing and shook my hand.

"I rang. A maid appeared. I asked:

"Monsieur Patience, if you please?"

"She answered:

"Right here, sir. Is it to monsieur that you wish to speak?"

"Yes."

"The hall was decorated with paintings from the brush of some local artist. Pauls and Virginias were kissing each other under palm trees bathed in a pink light. A hideous Oriental lantern was ranging from the ceiling. Several doors were concealed by bright hangings.

"But what struck me especially was the odor. It was a sickening and perfumed odor, reminding one of rice powder and the mouldy smell of a cellar. An indefinable odor in a heavy atmosphere as oppressive as that of public baths. I followed the maid up a marble stairway, covered with a

green, Oriental carpet, and was ushered into a sumptuous parlor.

"Left alone, I looked about me.

"The room was richly furnished, but in the pretentious taste of a parvenu. Rather fine engravings of the last century represented women with powdered hair dressed high surprised by gentlemen in interesting positions. Another lady, lying in a large bed, was teasing with her foot a little dog, lost in the sheets. One drawing showed four feet, bodies concealed behind a curtain. The large room, surrounded by soft couches, was entirely impregnated with that enervating and insipid odor which I had already noticed. There seemed to be something suspicious about the walls, the hangings, the exaggerated luxury, everything.

"I approached the window to look into the garden. It was very big, shady, beautiful. A wide path wound round a grass plot in the midst of which was a fountain, entered a shrubbery and came out farther away. And, suddenly, yonder, in the distance, between two clumps of bushes, three women appeared. They were walking slowly, arm in arm, clad in long, white tea-gowns covered with lace. Two were blondes and the other was dark-haired. Almost immediately they disappeared again behind the trees. I stood there entranced, delighted with this short and charming apparition, which brought to my mind a whole world of poetry. They had scarcely allowed themselves to be seen, in just the proper light, in that frame of foliage, in the midst of that mysterious, delightful park. It seemed to me that I had suddenly seen before me the great ladies of the last century, who were depicted in the engravings on the wall. And I began to think of the happy, joyous, witty and amorous times when manners were so graceful and lips so approachable.

"A deep voice made me jump. Patience had come in, beaming, and held out his hands to me.

"He looked into my eyes with the sly look which one takes when divulging secrets of love, and, with a Napoleonic gesture, he showed me his sumptuous parlor, his park, the three women, who had reappeared in the back of it, then, in a triumphant voice, where the note of pride was prominent, he said:

"And to think that I began with nothing--my wife and my

sister-in-law!"



CATHERINE'S QUEST.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *A Stable for Nightmares*, by
J. Sheridan Le Fanu and Charles Young and and Others

Imagine to yourself an old, rambling, red-brick house, with odd corners and gables here and there, all bound and clasped together with ivy, and you have Craymoor Grange. It was built long before Queen Elizabeth's time, and that illustrious monarch is said to have slept in it in one of her royal progresses--as where has she not slept?

There still remain some remnants of bygone ages, although it has been much modernized and added to in later days. Among these are the brewhouse and laundry--formerly, it is said, dining-hall and ball-room. The latter of these is chiefly remarkable for an immense arched window, such as you see in churches, with five lights.

When we came to the Grange this window had been partially blocked up, and in front of it, up to one-third of its height, was a wooden dais, or platform, on which stood a cumbrous mangle, left there, I suppose, by the last tenants of the house.

Of these last tenants we knew very little, for it was so long since it had been inhabited that the oldest authority in the village could not remember it.

There were, however, some half-defaced monuments in the village church of Craymoor, bearing the figures and escutcheons of knights and dames of "the old family," as the villagers said; but the inscriptions were worn and almost illegible, and for some time we none of us took the pains to decipher them.

We first came to Craymoor Grange in the summer of 1849, my husband having discovered the place in one of his rambles, and taken a fancy to it. At first I certainly thought we could never make it our home, it was

so dilapidated and tumble-down; but by the time winter came on we had had several repairs done and alterations made, and the rooms really became quite presentable.

As our family was small we confined ourselves chiefly to the newest part of the house, leaving the older rooms to the mice, dust, and darkness. We made use of two of the old rooms, however, one as a servants' bedroom and the other as an extra spare chamber, in case of many visitors. For myself, though I hope I am neither nervous nor superstitious, I confess that I would rather sleep in "our wing," as we called the part of the house we inhabited, than in any of the old rooms.

When Catherine l'Estrange came to us, however, during our first Christmas at Craymoor, I found that she was troubled with no such fancies, but declared that she delighted in queer old rooms, with raftered ceilings and deep window-seats, such as ours, and begged to be allowed to occupy the spare chamber. This I readily acceded to, as we had several visitors, and needed all the available rooms.

As my story has principally to do with Catherine l'Estrange, I suppose I ought to speak more fully about her. She was an old school-friend of my daughter Ella, and at the time of which I am speaking was just one-and-twenty, and the merriest girl I ever knew. She had stayed with us once or twice before we came to the Grange, but we then knew no other particulars concerning her family, than that her father had been an Indian officer, and that he and her mother had both died in India when she was about six years old, leaving her to the care of an aunt living in England.

I now, after a long, and I fear a tedious, preamble, come to my story.

On the eve of the new year of 1850, Catherine had a very bad sore throat, and was obliged, though sorely against her inclination, to stay in bed all day, and forego our small evening gayety.

At about 6 o'clock P.M., Ella took her some tea, and fearing she would be dull, offered to stay with her during the evening. This, however, Catherine would not hear of. "You go and entertain your company," said she laughingly, "and leave me to my own devices; I feel very lazy, and I dare say I shall go to sleep." As she had not slept much on the

preceding night, Ella thought it was the best thing she could do; so she went out by the door leading on to the corridor, first placing the night-lamp on a table behind the door opening on to the laundry, so that it might not shine in her face.

She did not again visit Catherine's room until reminded to do so by my son George, at about half-past ten. She then rapped at the door, and receiving no answer, opened it softly, and approached the bed. Catherine lay quite still, and Ella imagined her to be asleep. She therefore returned to the drawing-room without disturbing her.

As it was New Year's eve, we stayed up "to see the old year out and the new year in," and at a few minutes to twelve we all gathered round the open window on the stairs to hear the chimes ring out from the village church.

We were all listening breathlessly as the hall-clock struck twelve, when a piercing cry suddenly echoed through the house, causing us all to start in alarm. I knew that it could only proceed from Catherine's room, for the servants were all assembled at the window beneath us, listening, like ourselves, for the chimes. Thither therefore I flew, followed by Ella, and we found poor Catherine in a truly pitiable state.

She was deadly pale, in an agony of terror, and the perspiration stood in large drops upon her forehead. It was some time before we could succeed at all in composing her, and her first words were to implore us to take her into another room.

She was too weak to stand, so we wrapped her in blankets, and carried her into Ella's bedroom. I noticed that as she was taken through the laundry she shuddered, and put her hands before her eyes. When she was laid on Ella's bed she grew calmer, and apologized for the trouble she had caused, saying that she had had a dreadful dream.

With this explanation we were fain to be content, though I thought it hardly accounted for her excessive terror. I had observed, however, that any allusion to what had passed caused her to tremble and turn pale again, and I thought it best to refrain from exciting her further.

When morning came I found Catherine almost her usual self again; but I

persuaded her to remain in bed until the evening, as her cold was not much better. Ella's curiosity to hear the dream which had so much excited her friend could now no longer be restrained; but whenever she asked to hear it, Catherine said, "Not now; another time, perhaps, I may tell you."

When she came down to dinner in the evening, we noticed that she was peculiarly silent, and we endeavored to rally her into her usual spirits, but in vain. She tried to laugh and to appear merry, poor child; but there was evidently something on her mind.

At last, as we all sat round the fire after dinner, she spoke. She addressed herself to my husband, but the tone of her voice caused us all to listen.

"Mr. Fanshawe, I have something to ask of you," said she, and then paused.

"Ask on," said Mr. Fanshawe.

"I know that you will think the request I am going to make a peculiar one; but I have a particular reason for making it," continued she. "It is that you will have the wooden dais in front of the laundry window removed."

Mr. Fanshawe certainly was taken aback, as were we all. When he had mastered his bewilderment, and assured himself that he had heard aright--

"It is, indeed, a strange request, my dear Catherine," said he; "what can be your reason for asking such a thing?"

"If you will only have it done, and not question me, you will understand my reason," answered Catherine.

Mr. Fanshawe demurred, however, thinking it some foolish whim, and at last Catherine said:

"I must tell you why I wish it done, then: I am sure we shall discover something underneath."

At this we all looked at one another in extreme bewilderment.

"Discover something underneath? No doubt we should--cobwebs, probably, and dust and spiders," answered Mr. Fanshawe, much amused.

But Catherine was not to be laughed down.

"Only do as I wish," said she beseechingly, "and you will see. If you find nothing underneath the daïs but cobwebs and dust, then you may laugh at me as much as you like." And I saw that she was serious, for tears were actually gathering in her eyes. Of course we were all very anxious to know what Catherine expected to find, and how she came to suspect that there was anything to be found; but she would not say, and begged us all not to question her.

And now George took upon himself to interfere.

"Let us do as Catherine wishes, father," said he; "the daïs spoils the laundry, and would be much better away."

"Well, well," said Mr. Fanshawe, "do as you like, only I shall expect my share of the treasure that is found.--And now," added he, "you must have a glass of wine to warm you, Catherine, for you look sadly pale, child."

Here the conversation changed, though we often alluded to the subject again during the evening.

The next morning the first thing in all our thoughts was Catherine's singular request.

I think Mr. Fanshawe had hoped she would have forgotten it, but such was not the case; on the contrary, she enlisted George's services the first thing after breakfast to carry out her design, and they left the room together, accompanied by Ella.

It was a snowy morning, and Mr. Fanshawe was obliged to be away from home all day on business, so I was quite at a loss how to entertain my numerous guests successfully. Happily for me, however, the mystery attendant on the removal of the daïs in the laundry charmed them all;

and I have to thank Catherine for contributing to their amusement much better than I could possibly have done.

Not long after the disappearance of Catherine, Ella, and George, a message was sent to us in the drawing-room requesting our presence in the laundry; and on all flocking there with more or less eagerness, we found a fire burning on the old-fashioned hearth and chairs arranged round it.

It appeared that with the help of Sam, our factotum, who was a kind of Jack-of-all-trades, George had succeeded in loosening the planks of the dais, which, although strongly put together, were rotten and worm-eaten, and that we were now summoned to be witnesses of its removal. We found Catherine trembling with a strange eagerness, and her face quite pale with excitement. This was shared by Ella and George; and, judging by the important expression on their faces, I fancied they were let further into the secret than any one else.

We all sat down in the chairs placed for our accommodation, and the wild whistling of the wind in the huge chimney, together with the sheets of snow which darkened the window-panes, enhanced the mystery of the whole affair, while George and his coadjutor worked lustily on.

At length, after a great deal of panting and puffing, George was heard to exclaim, "Now for the tug of war!" and there followed a minute's pause, and then a crash as the loosened planks were torn asunder, and a cloud of dust enveloped both workmen and spectators.

Involuntarily we all started forward, and a moment of the direst confusion ensued, during which the boys of our party greatly endangered their limbs among the broken boards.

"By George!" exclaimed my son at last--in his eagerness invoking his patron saint--as he stumbled upon something, "there is something here and no mistake;" and, hastily clearing away the rubbish and clinging cobwebs, he disclosed to view what proved on examination to be an immense oaken chest, about four feet in height, heavily carved, and ornamented with brass mouldings corroded with age and damp.

Here was a piece of excitement indeed; never in my most imaginative

moments had I thought of anything so mysterious as this. The most sceptical among us grew interested.

"Oh, do open it!" cried Ella, when the first exclamations of surprise were over.

"Easier to say than to do, miss," replied Sam, exerting his Herculean strength in vain. With the aid of a hammer and the kitchen-poker, however, he at last succeeded in forcing it open. We all pressed forward eagerly to peer inside. There was something in it certainly, but we none of us could determine what, until Sam, who was the boldest of us all, thrust in his hand and brought forth--something which caused the bravest to start with horror, while poor Catherine sank down, white and trembling, upon the littered floor. It was a bone, to which adhered fragments of decaying silk.

The consternation and conjectures which followed can be better imagined than described. Seeing the effects of the discovery upon Catherine, and indeed upon all, I bade Sam replace it in the chest, which George closed again, to be left until Mr. Fanshawe came home and could investigate the matter.

The rest of the day I passed in attending to Catherine, who seemed much shocked and overcome by what she had seen, and in trying to divert my guests' thoughts from the subject, and dispel the gloom which had gathered over all. In this I succeeded only partially, and never did I welcome my husband's return more gladly than on that evening.

On his arrival I would not let him be disturbed by the relation of what had happened until he had finished his dinner, and it was not till we were gathered as usual round the fire that George related the whole story to him.

When he ended the two gentlemen left the room together, in order that Mr. Fanshawe might verify by his own eyes what he would hardly believe.

They were some time gone, and on their return I noticed that my husband held in his hand an old piece of soiled parchment, with mouldy seals affixed to it.

"We certainly have discovered much more than I thought for, Catherine," said he, "and possibly more than you thought for either." Here he paused for her to reply, but she did not.

"The bones are most probably those of some animal," added he--I fancied I could detect a certain anxiety in his tone that belied what he said; "but in order to quell the active imaginations which I can see are running away with some of you"--here he looked round with a smile--"I will send for Dr. Driscoll to come and examine them to-morrow. I have also found a piece of parchment in the chest," he added; "but I have not yet looked at its contents."

"Before you do that, Mr. Fanshawe, and before you send for the surgeon," interrupted Catherine suddenly in a clear voice, "I think I can tell you all about the bones found in the chest, and how I guessed them to be there."

"I should certainly be very glad to be told," my husband admitted, much surprised; "though how you can possibly know, I cannot surmise."

"Listen, and I will tell you," answered Catherine; and feeling very glad that our curiosity was at last to be gratified, we all "pricked up our ears," as George would say, to listen.

I here transcribe Catherine's story word for word, as my son George subsequently wrote it down from her dictation.

* * * * *

"You all remember," she began, "my alarming you on New Year's eve at midnight, and that I told you I was disturbed by a dreadful dream.

"I said so because I thought you would make fun of me if I called it a vision; and yet it was much more like a vision, for I seemed to see it waking, and it was more vivid and consecutive than any dream I ever had.

"Before I try to describe it, I want you all to understand that I seemed intuitively to comprehend what I saw, and to recognize all the figures which appeared before me, and their relation to one another, though I am sure I never beheld them before in my life.

"When Ella left me that night, I lay propped up with pillows, staring idly at the strange shadows thrown by the hidden lamp across the laundry ceiling and over the floor. As I looked it seemed to me that a change came over the room--a most unaccountable change.

"Instead of the blocked-up window, the rusty mangle, and the dais at the farther end, I saw the window clear and distinct from top to bottom, and in front of a deep window-seat at its base stood an oaken chest, exactly corresponding to the one discovered this morning. The room seemed brilliantly lighted, and everything was clearly and distinctly visible; and not only was it changed, but also peopled.

"Many figures passed up and down; brocaded silks swept the floor, and old-world forms of men in strange costumes bowed in courtly style to the dames by their side. Among all these figures I noticed only one couple particularly, and I knew them to be bride and bridegroom. The man was tall and broad, with dark hair and eyes, and a sensual and cruel face. He seemed, however, to be quite enslaved by the woman by his side, whom I hardly even now like to think of, there was something to me so repellent in her presence.

"She was tall and of middle age, and would have been handsome were it not for a sinister expression in her dark flashing eyes, which was enhanced by the black eyebrows which met over them.

"She reminded me irresistibly of the effigy on the stone monument in Craymoor church, which Ella and I named "the wicked woman."

"As I gazed on the strange scene before me I presently became aware of three other figures which I had not noticed before. They were standing in a small arched doorway in one corner of the room (where the servants' bedroom now is) furtively watching the gay company. One was a pale, careworn woman, apparently of about five-and-thirty, still beautiful, though haggard and mournful-looking, with blue eyes and a fair complexion.

"Her hands rested on the shoulders of two children, one a boy and the other a girl, of about ten and eleven years of age respectively. They much resembled their mother, and, like her, they were meanly dressed,

though no poverty of attire could hide the nobility of their aspect. I noticed that the mother's eyes rested chiefly on the face of the tall stately man before mentioned, who seemed unaware or careless of her presence; and instinctively I knew him to be the father of her children and the blighter of her life.

"As I looked and beheld all this, the lights vanished, the company disappeared, and the room became dark and deserted. No, not quite deserted, for I presently distinguished, seated on the window-seat by the old oaken chest, the fair woman and her children again.

"The moonlight now streamed through the window upon the woman's face, making it appear more ghastly and haggard than before. In her long thin fingers she was holding up to the light a necklace of large pearls, curiously interwoven in a diamond pattern, and on this the children's eyes were fixed.

"She then hung it on the girl's fair neck, who hid it in her bosom. Both children then twined their arms round their mother and kissed her repeatedly, while her head sank lower and lower, and the paleness of death overspread her features.

"This scene faded away as the other had done, and I saw the fair woman no more.

"Then it seemed to me that many figures passed and repassed before the window--the wicked woman (as I shall call her to distinguish her), accompanied by a boy the image of herself, whom I knew to be her son. He was apparently older than the fair-haired children, who also passed to and fro, attired as servants, and generally employed in some menial work.

"At last the wicked woman's son, with haughty gestures, ordered the other boy to pick up something that lay on the ground, and when he refused, he raised his cane as though to strike him. Before he could do so, however, the boy flew at him, and they engaged in a fierce struggle.

"In the midst of this the wicked woman, whom I had learned to dread, came forward and separated them; after which she pointed imperiously to the door, and signed to the younger boy to go out.

"He obeyed her mandate, but first threw his arms round his sister in a last embrace, and she detached the pearl necklace from off her neck and gave it to him. He then went out, waving a last adieu to her, and I saw him no more.

"Confused images seemed to crowd before me after this, and I remember nothing clearly until I beheld an infirm and tottering figure led away through the arched doorway, in whom I recognized the tall and stately man I had first seen in company with the wicked woman, but who was now an old man, apparently being supported to his bed to die. As he passed out he laid one trembling hand upon the head of the fair girl, now a blooming woman, and a softer shade came over his face. This the wicked woman noted, and she marked her disapproval by a vindictive frown.

"She also was older-looking, but age had in no degree softened her features; on the contrary, they appeared to me to wear a harsher expression than before.

"In the next scene which came before me, the wicked woman's son was evidently making love to the girl. Both were standing by the old window-seat, but her face was resolutely turned away from him, and when she at last looked at him it was with an expression of uncontrollable horror and dislike.

"Again this scene changed as those before it had done; the young man was gone, and only the light of a grated lantern illumined the room, or rather made darkness visible. The wicked woman was the only occupant of the laundry; she was kneeling by the oaken chest, trying to raise the heavy lid. In her left hand she held a piece of parchment, with large red seals pendent from it. I knew it to be the old man's will which she was hiding, thus defrauding the just claimants of their rights.

"Her hands trembled, and her whole appearance denoted guilty trepidation. At length, however, the lid was raised, but just as she was about to replace the parchment in the chest, a figure glided silently from a dark corner of the window-seat and confronted her. It was the fair girl, pale, resolute, and extending her hand to claim the will.

"After the first guilty start, which caused her to drop the parchment

into the chest, the wicked woman hurriedly tried to close the lid. Her efforts were frustrated, however, by the girl, who leaned with all her force upon it, keeping it back, and still held out her hand as before.

"There followed a pause, which seemed to me very long, but which could in reality have only lasted a minute.

"It was broken by the wicked woman, who, hastily casting a glance behind her into the gloom of the darkened chamber, then seized the girl by the arm and dragged her with all her force into the chest. It was but the work of a moment, for the woman was much the more powerful of the two, and the poor victim was too much taken by surprise to make much resistance. I saw one despairing look in her face as her murderess flashed the lantern before it with a hideous gleam of triumph.

"Then the lid was pressed down upon her, and I saw no more, only I felt an unutterable terror, and tried in vain to scream.

"This was not all the vision, however, for before I had mastered my terror the scene was superseded by another.

"This time it was twilight, and the wicked woman and her son were together. The son seemed to be talking eagerly, and grew more and more excited, while the mother stood still and erect, with a malicious smile upon her lips. Presently she moved toward the chest with a fell purpose in her eyes, unlocked it with a key which hung from her girdle, raised the lid and disclosed the contents.

"I understood it all now: the son was asking for the girl whom he had loved, and whom on his return home he missed, and the wicked woman, enraged at hearing for the first time that he had loved her, was determined to have her revenge.

"He should see her again.

"On beholding the dread contents of the chest, the man staggered back horrified; then, doubtless comprehending the case, he turned suddenly upon the murderess, and threw his arm around her, and there ensued a struggle terrible to witness.

"Her proud triumphant glance of malice was now succeeded by one of abject fear, and, as his strength began to gain the mastery, of despair.

"His iron frame heaved for a moment with the violence of his efforts, the next he had forced her down into the chest upon the mouldering body of her victim. I saw her eyes light up with the terror of death for one second, and then her screams were stifled forever beneath the massive lid.

"The horror of this scene was too much for me; I found voice to scream at last, and I suppose it was my cry which alarmed you all."

When Catherine ceased speaking there was a profound silence for a minute, which Mr. Fanshawe was the first to break as he said with a peculiar intonation in his voice, "It is very strange, very unaccountable," reëchoing all our thoughts.

Now it happened that Mr. Fleet, our family lawyer, was among our guests that Christmas-time, and since the discovery of the chest and bones had taken a great interest in the whole affair. He now questioned and cross-questioned Catherine, and seemed quite satisfied with the result.

"This would have made a fine case," said he, "if only it had been a question of the right of succession, for any lawyer to make out; but unfortunately the events are too long past to have any bearing upon the present." (There Mr. Fleet was wrong, though we none of us knew it at the time.)

We now all launched forth into conjectures and opinions, during which Catherine lay still and weary upon the sofa. I saw this, and thought it quite time to put an end to the day's adventures by suggesting a retirement for the night, and we were soon all dispersed to dream of the mysterious vision and discovery.

* * * * *

I think we were none of us sorry when morning dawned without any further tragedy (by _us_, I mean the female part of the establishment).

When I came down to breakfast I found Mr. Fleet very active on the

subject of the night before.

"A surgeon ought to be immediately sent for to pronounce an opinion on the contents of the chest," he said; and Dr. Driscoll presently came, and after examining the bones minutely, decided that they were, as we thought, those of two females, who might have been from one to two hundred years dead.

Mr. Fleet next offered to decipher the will, for such he imagined the parchment to be, and he and Mr. Fanshawe were closeted together for some time.

When they at last appeared again, they looked much interested and excited, and led me away to inform me of the result of their examination.

They told me that the document had proved to be a will, but that there was a circumstance connected with it which greatly added to the mystery of the whole business. This was the mention of the name of L'Estrange. I was, of course, as much surprised as they, and heard the will read with great interest.

I cannot remember the technical terms in which it was expressed. Mr. Fleet read me the translation he had made, for the original was in old English; but it was to this effect:

It purported to be the will of Reginald, Viscount St. Aubyn, in which he bequeathed all his inheritance to his lawful son Francis St. Aubyn--commonly known by the name of Francis l'Estrange--and to his heirs forever. It was signed Reginald, Viscount St. Aubyn, and the witnesses were John Murray and Phoebe Brett, who in the old copy had each affixed their mark.

Mr. Fleet affirmed that it was a perfectly legal document, but this was not all it contained.

There was an appendix which our lawyer translated as follows:

"In order to avoid all disputes and doubts which might otherwise arise, I do hereby declare that my lawful wife was Editha, youngest daughter of

Francis l'Estrange, Baronet, and that the register of our marriage may be seen in the church of St. Andrew, Haslet. By this marriage we had two children, a son Francis, and a daughter Catherine, commonly called Francis and Catherine l'Estrange. And I hereby declare that Agatha Thornhaugh was not legally married to me as she imagined, my lawful wife being alive at the time; neither do I leave to her son by her first husband, Ralph Thornhaugh, any part or share in my inheritance."

Both the will and the writing at the foot of it were dated the 14th of May, 1668.

This accumulation of mysteries caused me for a time to feel quite bewildered and unable to think, but Mr. Fleet was in his element.

"Here is a case worth entering into," said he, and he further went on to state that he had no doubt that the L'Estranges mentioned in the will were our Catherine's ancestors, the Christian names being similar rendering it more than probable. She was most likely a direct descendant of Francis l'Estrange, the heir mentioned in the will, who was no doubt also the fair-haired boy Catherine had seen in her vision.

The bones were those of his sister, the murdered Catherine l'Estrange, and of her murderess Agatha Thornhaugh, herself immured by her own son; but the matter ought not to rest on mere surmise, and the first place to go to for corroborating evidence was Craymoor church.

The rapidity with which Mr. Fleet came to his conclusions increased my bewilderment, and I was at a loss to know what evidence he expected to gain from Craymoor church. He reminded me, however, of Catherine's statement that "the wicked woman" of her vision resembled the effigy on the monument there.

Thither, then, the lawyer repaired, accompanied by Mr. Fanshawe and George. It was thought best to keep the sequel of the story from Catherine and the others until it was explained more fully, as Mr. Fleet boldly affirmed it should be. I awaited anxiously the result of their researches, and they exceeded I think even our good investigator's hopes.

Not only had they deciphered the inscription round the old monument, but

with leave from the clergyman and the assistance of the sexton they had disinterred the coffin and found it to be filled with stones.

I am aware that this was rather an illegal proceeding, but as Mr. Fleet was only acting *_en amateur_* and not professionally, he did not stick at trifles.

The inscription was in Latin, and stated that the tomb was erected in memory of Agatha, wife of Reginald, Viscount St. Aubyn, who was buried beneath, and who died on the 31st day of December, 1649--exactly two hundred years before the day on which Catherine had seen the vision.

I could not help thinking it shocking that the villagers had for two centuries been worshipping in the presence of a perpetual lie, but Mr. Fleet thought only of the grand corroboration of his "case." He applied to Mr. Fanshawe to take the next step, namely, to write to Catherine's aunt and only living relative, to tell her the whole story, and beg her to assist in elucidating matters by giving all the information she could respecting the L'Estrange family.

This was done, and we anxiously awaited the answer. Meantime, all my guests were clamorous to hear the contents of the will, and I had to appease them as best I could, by promising that they should know all soon.

In a few days, old Miss l'Estrange's answer came. She said her brother, father, and grandfather had all served in India, and that she believed her great-grandfather, who was a Francis l'Estrange, to have passed most of his life abroad, there having been a cloud over his early youth. What this was, however, she could not say. She affirmed that the L'Estranges had in old times resided in ----shire; and she further stated that her father's family had consisted of herself and her brother, whose only child Catherine was.

This was certainly not much information, but it was enough for our purpose. We no longer remained in doubt as to the truth of Mr. Fleet's version of the story, and when he himself told it to all our family-party one evening, every one agreed that he had certainly succeeded in making out a very clever case.

As for Catherine, on being told that the figures she had beheld in the vision were thought to be those of her ancestors, she was not so much surprised as I expected, but said that she had had a presentiment all along that the tragedies she had witnessed were in some way connected with her own family.

I must not forget to say that on ascertaining that the parish church of Haslet was still standing, we searched the register, and another link of evidence was made clear by the finding of the looked-for entry.

There remains little more to be told. The charge of the old will was committed to Mr. Fleet, and Catherine's story has been carefully laid up among the archives of our family. I say advisedly of our family, for the line of the L'Estranges, alias St. Aubyns, has been united to ours by the marriage of Catherine to my son George, which took place in 1850.

I who write this am an old woman now, but I still live with my son and daughter-in-law.

George has bought Craymoor Grange, thus rendering justice after the lapse of two centuries, and restoring the inheritance of her fathers to the rightful owner.

I have but one more incident to relate, and I have done. A short time ago, old Miss l'Estrange died, bequeathing all her worldly possessions to Catherine. Among these were some old family relics. Catherine was looking over them as George unpacked them, and she presently came to a miniature of a young and beautiful girl with fair hair and blue eyes, and a wistful expression, and with it a necklace of pearls strung in a diamond pattern. On seeing these she became suddenly grave, and handing them to me, said: "They are the same; the young girl, and the pearl necklace I told you of." No more was said at the time, for the children were present, and we had always avoided alluding to the horrible family tragedy before them; but if we had still retained any doubt about its truth--which we had not--this would have set it at rest.

If you were to visit Craymoor Grange now, you would find no old laundry. The part of the house containing it has been pulled down, and children play and chickens peckett on the ground where it once stood.

The oaken chest has also long since been destroyed.



CLARA'S LITTLE ESCAPE

from: Project Gutenberg's *Affinities and Other Stories*, by Mary Roberts Rinehart

"The plain truth is," said Carrie Smith, "that, no matter how happy two people may be together, the time comes when they are bored to death with each other."

Nobody said anything. It was true and we knew it. Ida Elliott put down the scarf she was knitting for the Belgians and looked down over the hill to where a lot of husbands were playing in the swimming pool.

"It isn't just a matter of being bored, you know, Carrie," she said. "A good many of us have made mistakes." Then she sighed. Ida is not really unhappy, but she likes to think she is.

None of the rest made any comment. But one or two of the other girls put down their knitting and looked out over the hills.

"I hope you don't mind my saying it, Clara," Carrie said, turning to me; "but it's a mistake to have a week-end party like this. Last night when I played pool with your Bill after the rest of you had gone upstairs, Wallie refused to speak to me when I went to bed. He's still sulking."

I am not sensitive; but when they everyone turned on me and said it was a beautiful party, but why, in heaven's name, had I asked only husbands and not one extra man, it made me a trifle hot.

"As most of us see our husbands only during week-ends," I said tartly, "I should think this sort of family reunion would be good for us."

Carrie sniffed.

"See them!" she snapped. "They've been a part of the landscape since we came, and that's all. Either they're in the pool, or playing clock golf, or making caricatures of themselves on the tennis court. A good photograph would be as comforting, and wouldn't sulk."

Well, the whole thing really started from that. I made up my mind, somehow or other, to even up with them. I'd planned a really nice party, and even if they were bored they might have had the politeness to conceal it.

Even now, badly as things turned out, I maintain that the idea was a good one. I had a bad time, I'll admit that. But the rest of them were pretty unhappy for a while. The only thing I can't quite forgive is that Bill--but that comes later on.

There had been very little doing all spring. Everybody was poor, and laying up extra motors, and trying to side-step appeals for Eastern relief, and hiding dressmakers' bills. There were hardly any dividends at all, and what with the styles completely changing from wide skirts to narrow ones, so that not a thing from last year would do, and the men talking nothing but retrenchment and staying at the table hours after every dinner party, fighting the war over again, while we sat and knitted, I never remember a drearier spring.

"Although," Carrie Smith said with truth, "the knitting's rather good for us. No woman can enjoy a cigarette and knit at the same time."

The craze for dancing was dying away, too, and nothing came along to take its place. The débutantes were playing tennis, but no woman over twenty-two should ever play tennis, so most of us were out of that. Anyhow it's violent. And bridge, for anything worth while, was apt to be too expensive.

But to go back.

We sat and knitted and yawned, and the husbands put on dressing gowns and ambled up the hill and round to the shower baths in the basement. I looked at Bill. Bill is my husband and I'm fond of Bill. But there are times when he gets on my nerves. He has a faded old bathrobe that saw him through college and his honeymoon, and that he still refuses to part

with, and he had it on.

It was rather short, and Bill's legs, though serviceable, are not beautiful.

He waved his hand to me.

"If you'd do a little of that sort of thing, Clara," he called, "you wouldn't need to have the fat rubbed off you by an expensive masseuse."

"Quite a typical husbandly speech!" said Carrie Smith.

"Do they ever think of anything but exercise and expense?"

Well, the men bathed and dressed and had whisky-and-sodas, and came out patronisingly and joined us at tea on the terrace. But inside of ten minutes they were in a group round the ball news and the financial page of the evening papers, and we were alone again.

Carrie Smith came over and sat down beside me, with her eyes narrowed to a slit.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings, Clara," she said, "but you see what I mean. They're not interested in us. We manage their houses and bring up their children. That's all."

As Carrie was the only one who had any children, and as they were being reared by a trained nurse and a governess, and the baby yelled like an Apache if Carrie went near him, her air of virtue was rather out of place. However:

"What would you recommend?" I asked wearily. "They're all alike, aren't they?"

"Not all." Her eyes were still narrowed. And at that moment Wallie Smith came over and threw an envelope into her lap.

"It came to the office by mistake," he said grimly. "What made you have your necklace reset when I'm practically bankrupt?"

"I bought hardly any new stones," she flashed at him. "Anyhow, I intend to be decently clothed. Tear it up; nobody's paying any bills."

He stalked away, and Carrie looked at me.

"No," she said slowly, "they are not all alike. Thank heaven there are a few men who don't hoist the dollar mark as a flag. Clara, do you remember Harry Delaney?"

I looked at Carrie.

A little spot of red had come into each of her cheeks, and her eyes, mere slits by now, were fixed on the far-away hills.

She and Harry had been engaged years ago, and she threw him over because of his jealous nature. But she seemed to have forgotten that.

"Of course," I said, rather startled.

"He was a dear. Sometimes I think he was the most generous soul in the world. I cannot imagine his fussing about a necklace, or sulking for hours over a bit of innocent pleasure like my playing a game of pool after a lot of sleepyheads had gone to bed."

"What time did you and Bill go upstairs?"

"Something after two. We got tired of playing and sat out here and talked. I knew you wouldn't mind, Clara. You've got too much sense. Surely a woman ought to be allowed friends, even if she is married."

"Oh, friends!" I retorted. "If she's going to keep her husband a friend she's got her hands full. Certainly I'm not jealous of you and Bill, Carrie. But it's not friends most of us want, if you're after the truth. We want passionate but perfectly respectable, commandment-keeping lovers!"

Carrie laughed, but her colour died down.

"How silly you are!" she said, and got up. "Maybe we'd like to feel that we're not clear out of the game, but that's all. We're a little tired of

being taken for granted. I don't want a lover; I want amusement, and if I'd married Harry Delaney I'd have had it."

"If you'd married him he would have been down there at the pool, showing off like a goldfish in a bowl, the same as the others."

"He would not. He can't swim," said Carrie, and sauntered away. Somehow I got the impression that she had been sounding me, and had got what she wanted. She looked very handsome that night, and wore the necklace. Someone commented on it at dinner, and Wallie glared across at it.

"It isn't paid for," he said, "and as far as I can see, it never will be."

Of course, even among old friends, that was going rather far.

Well, the usual thing happened after dinner. The men smoked and argued, and we sat on the terrace and yawned. When they did come out it was to say that golf and swimming had made them sleepy, and Jim Elliott went asleep in his chair. Carrie said very little, except once to lean over and ask me if I remembered the name of the man Alice Warrington had thrown over for Ted. When I told her she settled back into silence again.

The next morning all the husbands were up early and off to the club for a Sunday's golfing. At ten o'clock a note came in on my breakfast tray from Carrie.

"Slip on something and come to my room," it said.

When I got there Ida and Alice Warrington were there already, and Carrie was sitting up in bed, with the same spots of colour I'd seen before. I curled up on the bed with my hands round my knees.

"Go to it, Carrie," I said. "If it's church, it's too late. If it's a picnic, it looks like rain."

"Close the door, Ida," said Carrie. "Girls, I'm getting pretty tired of this."

"Of what?"

"Of dragging the matrimonial ball and chain wherever I go, and having to hear it clank and swear and sulk, and--all the rest. I'm tired, and so are all of you. Only I'm more honest."

"It's all rather a mess," Ida said languidly. "But divorce is a mess too. And, anyhow, what's the use of changing? Just as one gets to know a man's pet stories, and needn't pretend to laugh at them any more, why take on a new bunch of stories--or habits?"

"The truth is," said Carrie, ignoring her, "that they have all the good times. They don't have to look pretty. Their clothes last forever. And they're utterly selfish socially. You girls know how much they dance with the married women when there are any débutantes about."

We knew.

"The thing to do," said Carrie, "is to bring them back to a sense of obligation. They've got us. We stay put. They take us to parties and get up a table of bridge for us, and go off to a corner with a chit just out of school, or dance through three handkerchiefs and two collars, and grumble at paying our bridge losses. Or else they stay at home, and nothing short of a high explosive would get them out of their chairs."

"Destructive criticism," said Alice Warrington, "never gets anywhere. We agree with you. There's no discussion. Are you recommending the high explosive?"

"I am," said Carrie calmly. "I propose to wake them up, and to have a good time doing it."

Well, as it turned out, it was I who wakened them up, and nobody had a very good time about it.

"There's just one man a husband is always jealous of," Carrie went on, and her eyes were slitted as usual. "That's the man his wife could have married and didn't."

I expect I coloured, for Bill has always been insanely jealous of Roger

Waite, although honestly I never really cared for Roger. We used to have good times together, of course. You know.

Carrie's plan came out by degrees.

"It will serve two purposes," she said. "It will bring the men to a sense of responsibility, and stop this silly nonsense about bills and all that sort of thing. And it will be rather fun. It's a sin to drop old friends. Does Wallie drop his? Not so you could notice it. Every time I'm out of town he lives at Grace Barnabee's."

Carrie had asked us all to spend the next week-end with her, but the husbands were going to New York for the polo game and she had called the party off. But now it was on again.

"Do you girls remember the house party I had when Wallie was in Cuba, before we were engaged? We had a gorgeous time. I'm going to repeat it. It's silly to say lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place. Of course it does, if one doesn't use lightning rods. Peter Arundel for Alice, and Roger for you, Clara. Ida, you were in Europe, but we'll let you in. Who'll you have?"

"Only one?" asked Ida.

"Only one."

Ida chose Wilbur Bayne, and Carrie wrote the notes right there in bed, with a pillow for a desk, and got ink on my best linen sheets.

"I'm sorry I never thought of it before," she said. "The house party is bound to be fun, and if it turns out well we'll do it regularly. I'll ask in a few people for dancing Saturday night, but we'll keep Sunday for ourselves. We'll have a deliciously sentimental day."

She sat back and threw out her arms.

"Good Lord," she said, "I'm just ripe for a bit of sentiment. I want about forty-eight hours without bills or butlers or bridge. I'm going to send my diamond necklace to a safe deposit, and get out my débutante pearls, and have the wave washed out of my hair, and fill in the necks

of one or two gowns. I warn you fairly, there won't be a cigarette for any of you."

When I left them they were already talking clothes, and Carrie had a hand glass and was looking at herself intently in it.

"I've changed, of course," she sighed. "One can't have two children and not show the wear and tear of maternity. I could take off five pounds by going on a milk diet. I think I will."

She went on the diet at luncheon that day, and Wallie told her that if she would cut out heavy dinners and wine her stomach would be her friend, not her enemy. She glanced at me, but I ignored her. Somehow I was feeling blue.

The week-end had not been a success, and the girls had not been slow to tell me about it. The very eagerness with which they planned for the next week told me what a failure I'd had. Even then the idea of getting even somehow with Carrie was in the back of my mind.

The men did some trap shooting that afternoon, and during dinner Jim started a discussion about putting women on a clothes allowance and making them keep within it.

"I can systematise my business," he said, "but I can't systematise my home. I'm spending more now than I'm getting out of the mill."

Wallie Smith came up to scratch about that time by saying that his mother raised him with the assistance of a nursemaid, and no governess and trained nurse nonsense.

"That is why I insist on a trained nurse and a governess," said Carrie coldly, and took another sip of milk.

They went home that night, and Bill, having seen them into the motors, came up on the terrace.

"Bully party, old dear," he said enthusiastically. "Have 'em often, won't you?"

He sat down near me and put a hand over mine. All at once I was sorry I'd accepted Carrie's invitation. Not that there would be any harm in seeing Roger again, but because Bill wouldn't like it. The touch of his warm hand on mine, the quiet of the early summer night after the noise that had gone before, the scent of the honeysuckle over the pergola, all combined to soften me.

"I'm glad you had a good time, Bill," I said after a little silence. "I'm afraid the girls didn't enjoy it much. You men were either golfing or swimming or shooting, and there wasn't much to do but talk."

Bill said nothing. I thought he might be resentful, and I was in a softened mood.

"I didn't really mind your staying downstairs the other night with Carrie," I said. "Bill, do smell the honeysuckle. Doesn't it remind you of the night you asked me to marry you?"

Still Bill said nothing. I leaned over and looked at him. As usual he was asleep.

About the middle of the week Roger Waite called me up. We did not often meet--two or three times in the winter at a ball, or once in a season at a dinner. Ida Elliott always said he avoided me because it hurt him to see me. We had been rather sentimental. He would dance once with me, saying very little, and go away as soon as he decently could directly the dance was over. Sometimes I had thought that it pleased him to fancy himself still in love with me, and it's perfectly true that he showed no signs of marrying. It was rather the thing for the débutantes to go crazy about Roger. He had an air of knowing such a lot and keeping it from them.

"Why don't you keep him around?" Ida asked me once. "He's so ornamental. I'm not strong for tame cats, but I wouldn't mind Roger on the hearthrug myself."

But up to this time I'd never really wanted anybody on the hearthrug but Bill. If I do say it, I was a perfectly contented wife until the time Carrie Smith made her historic effort to revive the past. "Let sleeping dogs lie" is my motto now--and tame cats too.

Well, Roger called me up, and there was the little thrill in his voice that I used to think he kept for me. I know better now.

"What's this about going out to Carrie Smith's?" he said over the phone.

"That's all," I replied. "You're invited and I'm going."

"O!" said Roger. And waited a moment. Then:

"I was going on to the polo," he said, "but of course--What's wrong with Bill and polo?"

"He's going."

"Oh!" said Roger. "Well, then, I think I'll go to Carrie's. It sounds too good to be true--you, and no scowling husband in the offing!"

"It's--it's rather a long time since you and I had a real talk."

"Too long," said Roger. "Too long by about three years."

That afternoon he sent me a great box of flowers. My conscience was troubling me rather, so I sent them down to the dinner table. Whatever happened I was not going to lie about them.

But Bill only frowned.

"I've just paid a florist's bill of two hundred dollars," he grumbled.

"Cut out the American beauties, old dear."

It was not his tone that made me angry. It was his calm assumption that I had bought the things. As if no one would think of sending me flowers!

"If you would stop sending orchids to silly débutantes when they come out," I snapped, "there would be no such florist's bills."

One way or another Bill got on my nerves that week. He brought Wallie Smith home one night to dinner, and Wallie got on my nerves too. I could remember, when Wallie and Carrie were engaged and we were just married,

how he used to come and talk us black in the face about Carrie.

"How's Carrie, Wallie?" I said during the soup.

"She's all right," he replied, and changed the subject. But later in the evening, while Bill was walking on the lawn with a cigar, he broke out for fair.

"Carrie's on a milk diet," he said apropos of nothing. "If she stays on it another week I'm going to Colorado. She's positively brutal, and she hasn't ordered a real dinner for anybody for a week."

"Really!" I said.

He got up and towered over me.

"Look here, Clara," he said; "you're a sensible woman. Am I fat? Am I bald? Am I a doddering and toothless venerable? To hear Carrie this past few days you'd think I need to wear overshoes when I go out in the grass."

I rather started, because I'd been looking at Bill at that minute and wondering if he was getting his feet wet. He had only pumps on.

"It isn't only that she's brutal," he said, "she has soft moments when she mothers me. Confound it, I don't want to be mothered! She's taken off eight pounds," he went on gloomily. "And that isn't the worst." He lowered his voice. "I found her crying over some old letters the other day. She isn't happy, Clara. You know she could have married a lot of fellows. She was the most popular girl I ever knew."

Well, I'd known Carrie longer than he had, and of course a lot of men used to hang round her house because there was always something to do. But I'd never known that such a lot of them made love to Carrie or wanted to marry her. She was clever enough to hesitate over Wallie, but, believe me, she knew she had him cinched before she ran any risk. However:

"I'm sure you've tried to make her happy," I said. "But of course she was awfully popular."

I'm not so very keen about Carrie, but the way I felt that week, when it was a question between a husband and a wife, I was for the wife. "Of course," I said as Bill came within hearing distance, "it's not easy, when one's had a lot of attention, to settle down to one man, especially if the man is considerably older and--and settled."

That was a wrong move, as it turned out. For Bill, who never says much, got quieter than ever, and announced, just before he went to bed, that he'd given up the polo game. I was furious. I'd had one or two simple little frocks run up for Carrie's party, and by the greatest sort of luck I'd happened on a piece of flowered lawn almost exactly like one Roger used to be crazy about.

For twenty-four hours things hung in the balance. Bill has a hideous way of doing what he says he'll do. Roger had sent more flowers--not roses this time, but mignonette and valley lilies, with a few white orchids. It looked rather bridey. It would have been too maddening to have Bill queer the whole thing at the last minute.

But I fixed things at bridge one night by saying that I thought married people were always better off for short separations, and that I was never so fond of Bill as when he'd been away for a few days.

"Polo for me!" said Bill.

And I went out during my dummy hand and telephoned Carrie.

I hope I have been clear about the way the thing began. I feel that my situation should be explained. For one thing, all sorts of silly stories are going round, and it is stupid of people to think they cannot ask Roger and me to the same dinners. If Bill would only act like a Christian, and not roar the moment his name is mentioned, there would be a chance for the thing to die out. But you know what Bill is.

Well, the husbands left on Saturday morning, and by eleven o'clock Ida, Alice and I were all at Carrie's. The change in her was simply startling. She looked like a willow wand. She'd put her hair low on her neck, and except for a touch of black on her eyelashes, and of course her lips coloured, she hadn't a speck of makeup on. She'd taken the

pearls out of her ears, too, and she wore tennis clothes and flat-heeled shoes that made her look like a child.

She was sending the children off in the car as we went up the drive.

"They're off to mother's," she said. "I'll miss them frightfully, but this is a real lark, girls, and I can't imagine anything more killing to romance than small children."

She kissed the top of the baby's head, and he yelled like a trooper. Then the motor drove off, and, as Alice Warrington said, the stage was set.

"Get your tennis things on," Carrie said. "The men will be here for lunch."

We said with one voice that we wouldn't play tennis. It was too hot. She eyed us coldly.

"For heaven's sake," she said, "play up. Nobody asked you to play tennis. But if you are asked don't say it's too hot. Do any of the flappers at the club ever find it too hot to play? Sprain an ankle or break a racket, but don't talk about its being too violent, or that you've given it up the last few years. Try to remember that for two days you're in the game again, and don't take on a handicap to begin with."

Well, things started off all right, I'll have to admit that, although Carrie looked a trifle queer when Harry Delaney, getting out of the motor that had brought them from the station, held out a baby's rattle to her.

"Found it in the car," he said. "How are the youngsters anyhow?"

"Adorable!" said Carrie, and flung the rattle into the house.

Roger came straight to me and took both my hands.

"Upon my word, Clara," he said, "this is more luck than I ever expected again. Do you remember the last time we were all here together?"

"Of course I do." He was still holding my hands and I felt rather silly. But the others had paired off instantly and no one was paying any attention.

"I was almost suicidal that last evening. You--you had just told me, you know."

I withdrew my hands. When a man is being sentimental I like him to be accurately sentimental. It had been a full month after that house party, at a dance Carrie gave, that I had told him of my engagement to Bill. However, I said nothing and took a good look at Roger. He was wonderful.

Why is it that married men lose their boyishness, and look smug and sleek and domesticated almost before the honeymoon is over? Roger stood there with his hat in his hand and the hot noon sun shining on him. And he hadn't changed a particle, except that his hair was grey over his ears and maybe a bit thinner. He was just as eager, just as boyish, just as lean as he'd ever been. And positively he was handsomer than ever.

Bill is plain. He is large and strong, of course, but he says himself his face must have been cut out with an axe. "Rugged and true," he used to call himself. But lately, in spite of golf, he had put on weight.

Well, to get on.

Luncheon was gay. Everyone sat beside the person he wanted to sit beside, and said idiotic things, and Peter Arundel insisted on feeding Alice's strawberries to her one by one. Nobody talked bills or the high cost of living. Roger is a capital _raconteur_, and we laughed until we wept over his stories. I told some of Bill's stock jokes and they went with a hurrah. At three o'clock we were still at the table, and when Carrie asked the men if they wanted to run over to the Country Club for a couple of hours of golf Wilbur Bayne put the question to a vote and they voted "No" with a roar.

I remember that Harry Delaney said a most satisfactory thing just as luncheon was over.

"It's what I call a real party," he said. "After a man is thirty or

thereabouts he finds débutantes still thrilling, of course, but not restful. They're always wanting to go somewhere or do something. They're too blooming healthy. The last week-end I spent I danced until 4 A. M. and was wakened at seven-thirty by a fair young fellow throwing gravel through my open window and inviting me to a walk before breakfast!"

"Anyone seen about the place before eleven to-morrow morning," said Carrie, "will be placed under restraint. For one thing, it would make the servants talk. They're not used to it."

So far so good. I'll confess freely that if they'd let me alone I'd never have thought of getting even. But you know Carrie Smith. She has no reserves. And she had to tell about my party and the way the husbands behaved.

"Don't glare, Clara," she said. "Your house is nice and your food and drink all that could be desired. But it was not a hilarious party, and I'll put it up to the others."

Then and there she told about the swimming and the golf and the knitting. The men roared. She exaggerated, of course. Bill did not go to sleep at dinner. But she made a good story of it, and I caught Roger's eye fixed on me with a look that said plainly that he'd always known I'd made a mistake, and here was the proof.

We went out into the garden and sat under a tree. But soon the others paired off and wandered about. Roger and I were left alone, and I was boiling.

"Don't look like that, little girl," said Roger, bending toward me. "It hurts me terribly to--to think you are not happy."

He put a hand over mine, and at that moment Alice Warrington turned from a rosebush she and Peter were pretending to examine, and saw me. She raised her eyebrows, and that gave me the idea. I put my free hand over Roger's and tried to put my soul into my eyes.

"Don't move," I said. "Hold the position for a moment, Roger, and look desperately unhappy."

"I am," he said. "Seeing you again brings it all back. Are they looking? Shall I kiss your hand?"

I looked over. Alice and Peter were still staring.

"Bend over," I said quickly, "and put your cheek against it. It's more significant and rather hopeless. I'll explain later."

He did extremely well. He bent over passionately until his head was almost in my lap, and I could see how carefully his hair was brushed over a thin place at the crown. Thank goodness, Bill keeps his hair anyhow!

"How's this?" he said in a muffled voice.

"That's plenty." I'd made up my mind, and I meant to go through with it. But I felt like a fool. There's something about broad daylight that makes even real sentiment look idiotic.

He sat up and looked into my eyes.

"There are times," he said, raising his voice, "when I feel I can't stand it. I'm desperately--desperately unhappy, Clara."

"We must make the best of things," I said, and let my eyes wander toward Alice and Peter. They had turned and were retreating swiftly through the garden.

"Now," said Roger, sitting back and smoothing his hair, "what's it all about?"

So I told him and explained my plan. Even now, when I never want to see him again, I must admit that Roger is a sport. He never turned a hair.

"Of course I'll do it. It isn't as hard as you imagine. Our meeting like this revives the old fire. I'm mad about you, recklessly mad, and you're crazy about me. All right so far. But a thing like that won't throw much of a crimp into Carrie. Probably she expects it."

"To-night," I explained, "we'll be together, but silent and moody. When

we smile at their nonsense it is to be a forced smile. We're intent on ourselves. Do you see? And you might go to Carrie after dinner and tell her you think you'll go. You can't stand being near me. It's too painful. I'll talk to one of the men too."

He looked rather uncomfortable.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, Clara. They wouldn't understand."

"Not about you," I retorted coldly. "I'll merely indicate that Bill and I aren't hitting it off, and that a woman has a right to be happy. Then, when things happen, they'll remember what I said."

He turned round his wicker chair so that he faced me.

"When things happen?" he said. "What things?"

"When we elope to-morrow night," I replied.

I'm not defending myself. Goodness knows I've gone through all that. I am merely explaining. And I think Roger deserves part of the blame, but of course the woman always suffers. If he had only been frank with me at the time it need never have happened. Besides, I've been back to that bridge again and again, and with ordinary intelligence and a hammer he could have repaired it. It is well enough for him to say he didn't have a hammer. He should have had a hammer.

At the mention of an elopement Roger changed colour, but I did not remember that until afterward. He came up to scratch rather handsomely, when he was able to speak, but he insisted that I write the whole thing to Bill.

"I can tell him afterward," I protested.

"That won't help me if he has beaten me up first. You write him to the office, so he'll get it Monday morning when he gets back from the game. If anything should slip up you're protected, don't you see? Tell him it's a joke and why we're doing it. I--I hope Bill has kept his sense of humor."

Well, it looked simple enough. We were to act perfectly silly and moonstruck all the rest of that day and Sunday until we had them all thoroughly worried. Then on Sunday night we were to steal Wallie's car and run away in it. The through train stops at a station about four miles away, at eleven-fourteen at night, and we were to start that way and then turn around and go to mother's.

We planned it thoroughly, I must say. Roger said he'd get one of the fellows to cash a check for all the money he had about him. They'd be sure to think of that when Carrie got my note. And I made a draft of the note then and there on the back of an old envelope from Roger's pocket. We made it as vague as possible.

"Dear Carrie," it ran, "by the time you receive this I shall be on my way to happiness. Try to forgive me. I couldn't stand things another moment. We only live one life and we all make mistakes. Read Ellen Key and don't try to follow me. I'm old enough to know my own mind, and all you have been saying this last few days has convinced me that when a chance for happiness comes one is a fool not to take it. Had it not been for you I should never have had my eyes opened to what I've been missing all this time. I have wasted my best years, but at last I am being true to myself. CLARA."

"Now," I said, rather viciously I dare say, "let her read that and throw a fit. She'll never again be able to accuse me of making things dull for her."

Roger read it over.

"We'd better write Bill's letter," he said, "and get it off. We--it wouldn't do to have Bill worried, you know."

So we went into the house and wrote Bill's letter. We explained everything--how stupid they'd all found our party and that this was only a form of revenge.

"Suppose," Roger said as I sealed it, "suppose they get excited and send for the police?"

That stumped us. It was one thing to give them a bad night, and

telephone them in the morning that it was a joke and that I'd gone direct from Carrie's to mother's, which was the arrangement. But Carrie was a great one for getting in detectives. You remember, the time her sister was married, that Carrie had a detective in the house for a week before the wedding watching the presents, and how at the last minute the sister wanted to marry the detective, who was a good-looking boy, and they had a dreadful time getting her to the church.

We both thought intently for quite a time.

"We must cut the telephone wire, Roger," I said at length.

Roger was not eager about cutting the telephone. He said he would probably be shocked to death, although if he could find a pair of rubber overshoes he'd take the risk.

"It ought to be done the very last thing," he said. "No use rousing their suspicions early."

We played up hard all afternoon. Roger kissed the lump of sugar he put in my tea, and went and sulked on the parapet when Peter Arundel came and sat beside me. Carrie joined him there, and I could see her talking earnestly to him while Roger looked out over the landscape with eyes that were positively sombre.

"Having a good time?" said Peter Arundel to me.

"Heavenly, Peter," I replied, looking at Roger. "I didn't believe I could be so happy."

"Go to it," said Peter. "What's a day or two out of a lifetime."

I turned round and faced him, my hands gripped hard in my lap.

"That's it," I said tensely. "That's the thought that's killing me. One can only be happy for a day or two."

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as that," said Peter. "You have a pretty fair time, you know, Clara. Old Bill's a good sort."

"Oh, Bill!" I said.

"I went to college with Bill. Maybe Bill hasn't any frills, but he's a real man." He glared at Roger's drooping shoulders. "He's no tailor's dummy anyhow."

I ignored this.

"Peter," I said in a thin voice, "have you ever read Ellen Key?"

"Not on your life!" said Peter.

I quoted a bit I happened to remember.

"Nothing is wiser than the modern woman's desire to see life with her own eyes, not only with those of a husband." I sighed.

"If I were Bill," said Peter, "I'd burn that book."

"Nothing," I continued, "is more true than that souls which are parted by a lack of perfect frankness never belonged to one another."

"Look here," said Peter, and got up; "I think you've lost your mind, Clara--you and Roger Waite both. Look at him mooning over there. I'd like to turn the garden hose on him."

I looked at Roger--a long gaze that made Peter writhe.

"Love's double heartbeat'----" I began. But Peter stalked away, muttering.

Carrie had left Roger, so I put down my cup and followed him to the parapet of the terrace.

"Darling!" he said. And then, finding Peter was not with me: "How's it going?"

"Cracking! They're all worried already."

"We've hardly started. Slip your arm through mine, Clara, and I'll hold

your hand. Dear little hand!" he said. "When I think that instead of that ring----" Here he choked and kissed my hand. Then I saw that Harry Delaney was just below the wall.

Carrie's voice broke in on our philandering.

"If," she said coldly, "you two people can be pried apart with a crowbar for a sufficient length of time, we will motor to Bubbling Spring. There's just time before dinner."

"I don't think I'll go, Carrie," I said languidly. "I have a headache and Roger has just offered to read to me. Do you remember how you used to cure my headaches, Roger?"

"I'd rather not talk about those days, Clara," said Roger in a shaky voice.

"I wish you two people could see and hear yourselves!" Carrie cried furiously, and turned on her heel.

"I guess that will hold her for a while," Roger purred. "Clara, you're an angel and an inspiration. I haven't had such a good time since I had scarlet fever."

Dinner, which should have been gay, was simply noisy. They were all worried, and it is indicative of how Carrie had forgotten her pose and herself that she wore her diamond necklace. Roger had been placed at the other end of the table from me, but he slipped in and changed the cards. There were half a dozen dinner guests, but Roger and I ate little or nothing.

"Act as though the thought of food sickens you," I commanded.

"But I'm starving!"

"I'll have my maid take a tray into the garden later."

In spite of me he broke over at the entrée, which was extremely good. But everyone saw that we were not eating. The woman on Roger's right, a visitor, took advantage of a lull in the noise to accuse Roger of being

in love. Ida giggled, but Roger turned to his neighbour.

"I am in love," he said mournfully; "hopelessly, idiotically, madly, recklessly in love."

"With any particular person?"

"With you," said Roger, who had never seen her before.

She quite fluttered.

"But I am married!"

"Unfortunate, but not fatal," said Roger distinctly, while everyone listened. "These days one must be true to one's self."

We were awfully pleased with ourselves that evening. I said my head still ached and I could not dance. Roger and I sat out-of-doors most of the time, and at eleven o'clock Powell, my maid, brought out a tray of what was left from dinner and the dance supper. She took it by order to a small shaded porch off the billiard room, and we found her there with it.

"Thank you, Powell," I said. But Roger followed her into the house. When he returned he was grinning.

"Might as well do it right while we're about it," he observed.

"To-morrow morning Powell will go to Carrie and tell her you sat up all night by the window, and she's afraid you are going to be ill."

In the dusk we shook hands over the tray.

Well, a lot of things happened, such as our overhearing the men in the billiard room debating about getting poor old Bill on the long distance.

"It isn't a flirtation," said Wilbur Bayne. "I've seen Clara flirting many a time. But this is different. They're reckless, positively reckless. When a man as fond of his stomach as Roger lets a whole meal go by, he's pretty far gone."

Roger bent over, with a part of a squab in his hand.

"Have they bitten!" he said. "They've not only swallowed hook, line and sinker but they're walking up the bank to put themselves in the basket!"

Well, the next morning it was clear that the girls had decided on a course and were following it. Although it had been arranged that everyone was to sleep late, breakfast trays appeared in the rooms at nine-thirty, with notes asking us to go to church. When I said I had not slept, and did not care to go, no one went, and when Roger appeared at eleven the girls surrounded me like a cordon of police.

Roger was doing splendidly. He came up across the tennis court, covered with dust, and said he had not slept and had been walking since six o'clock. The men eyed him with positive ferocity.

I'll not go into the details of that day, except to relate a conversation Ida Elliott and I had after luncheon. She came into my room and closed the door behind her softly, as if I were ill.

"Well," she said, "I did think, Clara, that if you didn't have any sense, you would have some consideration for Carrie."

I had been addressing the envelope to Bill, and so I shoved a sheet of paper over it.

"I'm not going to try to read what you are writing," she said rudely.

"What do you mean about Carrie?"

"She's almost ill, that's all. How could anyone have had any idea that Roger and you----" She fairly choked.

"Roger and I are only glad to be together again," I said defiantly. Then I changed to a wistful tone. Just hearing it made me sorry for myself. "We are old friends; Carrie knew that. It is cruel of you all to--to spoil the little bit of happiness I can get out of life."

"What about Bill?"

"Bill?" I said vaguely. "Oh--Bill! Well, Bill would never stand in the way of my being true to myself. He would want me to be happy."

I put my handkerchief suddenly to my eyes, and she gave me a scathing glance.

"I'm going to telephone Bill," she said. "You're not sane, Clara. And when you come back to your senses it may be too late."

She flounced out, and I knew she would call Bill if she could. From the window I could see that Harry Delaney had Roger by the arm and was walking him up and down. It was necessary, if the fun was to go on, to disconnect the telephone. I ran down to the library and dropped the instrument on the floor twice, but when I put it to my ear to see if it was still working I found it was, for Central was saying: "For the love of heaven, something nearly busted my eardrum!"

Ida had not come down yet, and the telephone was on a table in the corner, beside a vase of flowers. When I saw the flowers I knew I was saved. I turned the vase over and let the water soak into the green cord that covers the wires. I knew it would short-circuit the telephone, for once one of the maids at home, washing the floor, had wet the cord, and we were cut off for an entire day.

During the afternoon I gave Harry Delaney the letter to Bill. Harry was going to the little town that was the post office to get something for Carrie.

"You won't forget to mail it, will you, Harry?" I asked in a pathetic voice.

He read the address and looked at me.

"What are you writing to Bill for, Clara? He'll be home in the morning."

I looked confused. Then I became frank.

"I'm writing him something I don't particularly care to tell him."

He fairly groaned and thrust the thing into his pocket.

"For refined cruelty and absolute selfishness," he said, "commend me to the woman with nothing to do but to get into mischief."

"Will you promise to mail it?"

"Oh, I'll mail it all right," he said; "but I give you until six o'clock this evening to think it over. I'm not going to the station until then."

"To think over what?" I asked, my eyes opened innocently wide. But he flung away in a fury.

It was rather fun that afternoon. If my party had been dreary on Sunday it was nothing to Carrie's. They'd clearly all agreed to stay round and keep Roger and me apart. Everybody sulked, and the men got the Sunday newspapers and buried themselves in them. Once I caught Roger dropping into a doze. He had refused the paper and had been playing up well, sitting back in his chair with his cap over his eyes and gazing at me until everybody wiggled.

"Roger," I called, when I saw his eyes closing, "are you game for a long walk?"

Roger tried to look eager.

"Sure," he said.

"Haven't you a particle of humanity?" Carrie demanded. She knew some of them would have to go along, and nobody wanted to walk. It was boiling. "He has been up since dawn and he's walked miles."

Roger ignored her.

"To the ends of the world--with you, Clara," he said, and got up.

In the end they all went. It was a tragic-looking party. We walked for miles and miles, and Carrie was carrying her right shoe when we got back. It was too late to dress for dinner, and everyone was worn out. So we went in as we were.

"I'm terribly sorry it's nearly over," I babbled as the soup was coming in. "It has been the most wonderful success, hasn't it? Ida, won't you have us all next week? Maybe we can send the husbands to the yacht races."

"Sorry," said Ida coldly; "I've something else on."

Worried as they were, nobody expected us to run away. How to let them know what had happened, and put a climax to their discomfiture, was the question. I solved it at last by telling Powell to come in at midnight with the sleeping medicine Carrie had given her for me. I knew, when she found I was not there, she would wait and at last raise the alarm. What I did not know was that she would come in half an hour early, and cut off our lead by thirty minutes.

The evening dragged like the afternoon, and so thoroughly was the spice out of everything for them all, that when I went upstairs at ten-thirty Ida Elliott was singing Jim's praises to Wilbur Bayne, and Carrie had got out the children's photographs and was passing them round.

As I went out through the door Roger opened for me, he bowed over my hand and kissed it.

"Oh, cut it out!" I heard Peter growl, and there was a chorus from the others.

I had to stop in the hall outside and laugh. It was the last time I laughed for a good many hours.

By eleven I was ready. Everyone was upstairs, and Carrie had found out about the telephone by trying to call up her mother to inquire about the children. I had packed a small suitcase and at Roger's whistle I was to drop it out the window to him. Things began to go wrong with that, for just as I was ready to drop it someone rapped at my door. I swung it too far out, and it caught Roger full in the chest and carried him over backward. I had just time to see him disappear in the shrubbery with a sort of dull thud when Alice Warrington knocked again.

She came in and sat on the bed.

"I don't want to be nasty, Clara," she said, "but you know how fond I am of you, and I don't want you to misunderstand Roger. It's his way to make violent love to people and then get out. Of course you know he's being very attentive to Maisie Brown. She's jealous of you now. Somebody told her Roger used to be crazy about you. If she hears of this----"

"Clara!" said Roger's voice under the window.

Alice rose, with the most outraged face I've ever seen.

"He is positively shameless," she said. "As for you, Clara, I can't tell you how I feel."

"Clara!" said Roger. "I must speak to you. Just one word."

Alice swept out of the room and banged the door. I went to the window.

"Something seems to have broken in the dratted thing," he said. "It smells like eau de Cologne. I'm covered with it."

As it developed later it was eau de Cologne. I have never got a whiff of it since that I don't turn fairly sick. And all of that awful night Roger fairly reeked with it.

Well, by midnight everything was quiet, and I got downstairs and into the drive without alarming anyone. Roger was waiting, and for some reason or other--possibly the knock--he seemed less enthusiastic.

"I hope Harry remembered the letter to Bill," he said. "Whether this thing is a joke or not depends on the other person's sense of humor. What in heaven's name made you put scent in your bag?"

He had his car waiting at the foot of the drive, and just as I got in we heard it thunder.

"How far is it to your mother's?"

"Twelve miles."

"It's going to rain."

"Rain or not, I'm not going back, Roger," I said. "Imagine Bill's getting that letter for nothing."

He got into the car and it began to rain at once. Everyone knows about that storm now. We had gone about four miles when the sky fairly opened. The water beat in under the top and washed about our feet. We drove up to the hubs in water, and the lights, instead of showing us the way, only lit up a wall of water ahead. It was like riding into Niagara Falls. We were pretty sick, I can tell you.

"Why didn't you look at the sky?" I yelled at Roger, above the beating of the storm. "Bill can always tell when it's going to storm."

"Oh, damn Bill!" said Roger, and the car slid off the road and into a gully. Roger just sat still and clutched the wheel.

"Aren't you going to do something?" I snapped. "I'm not going to sit here all night and be drowned."

"Is there anything you could suggest?"

"Can't you get out and push it?"

"I cannot."

But after five minutes or so he did crawl out, and by tying my suitcase straps round one of the wheels he got the car back into the road. I daresay I was a trifle pettish by that time.

"I wish you wouldn't drip on me," I said.

"I beg your pardon," he replied, and moved as far from me as he could.

We went on in silence. At last:

"There's one comfort about getting that soaking," he said: "it's washed that damned perfume off."

There's one thing about Bill, he keeps his temper. And he doesn't raise the roof when he gets his clothes wet. He rather likes getting into difficulties, to show how well he can get out of them. But Roger is like a cat. He always hated to get his feet wet.

"If you had kept the car in the centre of the road you wouldn't have had to get out," I said shortly.

"Oh, well, if you're going back to first causes," he retorted, "if you'd never suggested this idiotic thing I wouldn't be laying up a case of lumbago at this minute."

"Lumbago is middle-aged, isn't it?"

"We're neither of us as young as we were a few years ago."

That was inexcusable. Roger is at least six years older than I am. Besides, even if it were true, there was no necessity for him to say it. But there was no time to quarrel, for at that moment we were going across a bridge over a small stream. It was a river now. The first thing I knew was that the car shook and rocked and there was a dull groaning underneath. The next minute we had gone slowly down about four feet and the creek was flowing over us.

We said nothing at first. The lights went off almost immediately, as the engine drowned, and there we sat in the flood, and the first thing I knew I was crying.

"The bridge is broken," said Roger, above the rush of the stream.

"I didn't think you were washing the car," I whimpered. "We'll be drowned, that's all."

The worst of the storm was over, but as far as I was concerned it might just as well have been pouring. When Roger got his matches and tried to light one it only made a sick streak of phosphorescence on the side of the box. To make things worse, Roger turned round, and where the road crossed the brow of the hill behind us there was the glow of automobile lamps. He swore under his breath.

"They're coming, Clara," he said. "That fool of a maid didn't wait until midnight."

The thought of being found like that, waist-deep in water, drove me to frenzy. I knew how they'd laugh, how they'd keep on laughing for years. They'd call us the Water Babies probably, or something equally hateful. I just couldn't stand the thought.

I got up.

"Let them think we're drowned--anything," I said desperately. "I will not be found like this."

Roger looked about like a hunted animal.

"There's--there's a house near here on the hill," he said. Afterward I remembered how he hesitated over it. "We could get up there, I'm pretty sure."

He looked back.

"They seem to have stopped," he said. "Perhaps the other bridge has gone."

He lifted me out and set me on the bank. He was not particularly gentle about it, and I was all he could carry. That's one thing about Bill--he's as strong as an ox and as gentle as a young gazelle.

Well, we scurried up the bank, the water pouring off us, and I lost a shoe. Roger wouldn't wait until I found it, but dragged me along, panting. Suddenly I knew that I hated him with a deadly hatred. The thought of how nearly I had married him made me shiver.

"I wish you'd let go of me," I said.

"Why? You can't climb alone in the silly clothes you wear."

"Perhaps not, but I don't like you to touch me."

"Oh, if you feel like that----" He let me go, and I almost fell. "You

know, Clara, I am trying hard to restrain myself, but--this is all your doing."

"I suppose I broke the bridge down," I said bitterly, "and brought on the rain, and all the rest of it."

"Now I recognise the Clara I used to know," he had the audacity to say, "always begging the question and shifting the responsibility. For heaven's sake don't stop to quarrel! They've probably found the car by this time."

We got to the house and I fell exhausted on the steps. To my surprise Roger got out a bunch of keys and fitted one to the lock.

"I know these people," he said. "I--I sometimes come out in the fall for a bit of shooting. Place is closed now."

The interior looked dark and smelled musty. I didn't want to go in, but it was raining again and there was nothing else to do.

"Better overcome your repugnance and give me your hand," he said. "If we turn on a light they'll spot us."

Oh, it is all very well to say, looking back, that we should have sat in the car until we were found, and have carried it all off as a part of the joke. I couldn't, that's flat. I couldn't have laughed if I'd been paid to.

We bumped into a square hall and I sat down. It was very quiet all at once, and the only thing to be heard was the water dripping from us to the hardwood floor.

"If that's a velvet chair you're on it will be ruined," said Roger's voice out of the darkness.

"I hope it is. Where is the telephone?"

"There is a telephone closet under the stairs."

"You know a lot about this house. Whose is it?"

"It's the Brown place. You know it."

"Maisie Brown's!"

"Yes." He was quite sullen.

"And you have a key like one of the family! Roger, you are engaged to her!"

"I was," he said. "The chances are when this gets out I won't be."

I don't know why now, but it struck me as funny. I sat and laughed like a goose, and the more I laughed the harder Roger breathed.

"You've got to see me through this, Clara," he said at last. "You can't telephone Carrie--you've fixed all that. But you can get your mother. Tell her the circumstances and have her send a car for you. I'll stay here to-night. And if you take my advice you'll meet Bill at the train to-morrow morning and beat Carrie to it. She'll be in town with a line of conversation by daybreak."

He found some dry matches and led me to the telephone. Something in the way I dripped, or because I padded across the floor in one stocking foot, made him a trifle more human.

"I'll close the curtains and light the log fire," he said. "Things are bad enough without your taking pneumonia."

The moment I took the receiver off the hook I knew the wires were down somewhere. I sat for a moment, then I opened the door. Roger was on his knees lighting the fire. He looked very thin, with his clothes stuck to him, and the hair that he wore brushed over the bare place had been washed down, and he looked almost bald.

"Roger," I said, with the calmness of despair, "the wires are down!"

"Hush," said Roger suddenly. "And close that door."

It seemed rather foolish to me at the time. Since they had followed us,

they'd know perfectly well that if Roger was there I was.

In walked Maisie Brown and about a dozen other people!

I can still hear the noise they made coming in, and then a silence, broken by Maisie's voice.

"Why, Roger!" she said.

"Awfully surprising to see you here--I mean, I expect you are surprised to see me here," said Roger's voice, rather thin and stringy. "The fact is, I was going by, and--it was raining hard, and I----"

"Then that was your car in the creek?"

"Well, yes," Roger admitted, after a hesitation. He was evidently weighing every word, afraid of committing himself to anything dangerous.

"I thought you were at Carrie Smith's."

"I was on my way home."

Everybody laughed. It was about a dozen miles to Roger's road home from Carrie's.

"Come on, now, there's a mystery. Own up," said a man's voice. "Where's the beautiful lady? Drowned?"

Luckily no one waited for an answer. They demanded how he had got in, and when he said he had a key they laughed again. Some one told Maisie she might as well confess. If Roger had a key to the house it required explanation.

If ever I heard cold suspicion in a girl's voice, it was in Maisie's when she answered:

"Oh, we're engaged all right, if that's what you mean," she said. "But I think Roger and I----"

They didn't give her a chance to finish, the idiots! They gave three

cheers, and then, as nearly as I could make out, they formed a ring and danced round them. They'd been to a picnic somewhere, and as the bridges were down they were there for the night.

Do you think they went to bed?

Not a bit of it. They found some canned things in a pantry, and fixed some hot drinks and drank to Maisie and Roger. And I sat in the telephone closet and tried not to sneeze.

I sat there for two hours.

About two o'clock I heard Maisie say she would have to telephone home, and if a totally innocent person can suffer the way I did I don't know how a guilty one could live. But Roger leaped in front of her.

"I'll do it, honey," he said. "I--I was just thinking of telephoning."

They were close to the door.

"Don't call me honey," Maisie said in a tense voice. "I know about Carrie Smith's party and who was there. After the way Clara has schemed all these years to get you back, to have you fall into a trap like that! It's sickening!"

She put her hand on the knob of the door.

"Listen, darling," Roger implored. "I--I don't care a hang for anyone but you. I'm perfectly wretched. I----"

He pulled her hand off the knob of the door and I heard him kiss it.

"Let me call your mother," he said. "She'll know you are all right when I'm here."

Well, I had to listen. The idea of her saying I'd tried to get him back, when everybody knows how he carried on when I turned him down! I hadn't given him a thought for years.

"Did you make love to Clara?"

"Certainly not. Look here, Maisie, you can afford to be magnanimous. Clara's a nice woman, but she's years older than you are. You know who loves you, don't you?"

Positively he was appealing. He sounded fairly sick.

"Get mother on the wire," said Maisie curtly. "Then call me. I'll talk to her."

Roger opened the door as soon as she had gone and squeezed in beside me.

"She's coming to telephone. You'll have to go somewhere else, Clara," he said.

"Where, for instance?"

"I may be able to collect them in the pantry. Then you can run across and get out the door."

"Into the rain?"

"Well, you can't stay here, can you?"

"I'll do nothing of the sort. Go and tell her the wires are down. They are. And then get that crowd of flappers upstairs. If they go the men will. I give you ten minutes. At the end of that time I'm coming out to the fire. I'm cold."

"And after they go up, what?"

"Then you're going into somebody's room to steal me a pair of dry shoes. Get Maisie's, she's about my size. We'll have to walk to mother's."

"I can't leave, Clara. If anything happened and I was missing-----"

When I said nothing he knew I was in earnest. He went out and told them the telephone was out of order, and somehow or other he shooed them upstairs. I opened the door of the telephone closet for air, and I could hear them overhead, ragging Roger about the engagement and how he

happened to get to Maisie's when it was so far from his road home. Every time I thought they were settled, some fool of a boy or giggling débutante would come down again and look for soap, or towels, or matches, or heaven knows what. I could have strangled the lot of them.

By three o'clock it was fairly quiet, and I crept out and sat by the log fire. If I had had a shoe I would have started off then and there. I'm no coward and I was desperate. But I couldn't go in my silk stockings. And when after a while Roger slipped down the stairs he had no shoes for me.

"I've tried all the girls' doors," he said wretchedly, "and they're locked. Couldn't you tie a towel round your foot, or something? I'm going to get into trouble over this thing yet. I feel it."

"Go up and bring me little Teddy Robinson's shoes," I snapped. "It won't compromise you to go into his room, I daresay."

"What if he's not asleep?"

"Tell him you're going to clean them. Tell him anything. And, Roger, don't let Maisie pull the ingénue stunt on you. I may be years older than she is, but Maisie's no child."

Well, with everyone gone and Roger hunting me some boots, I felt rather better. I went to the pantry and fixed some hot milk and carried it in to drink by the fire. Roger came down with the boots, and to save time he laced them on my feet while I sat back and sipped.

That, of course, in spite of what Bill pretends to think, is why Roger was on his knees before me when Peter walked in.

Oh, yes, Peter Arundel walked in! It just shows the sort of luck I played in that night. He walked in and slammed the door.

"Thank heaven!" he said, and stalked over to me and jerked the cup out of my hand. "You pair of idiots!" he fairly snarled. "What sort of an escapade is this anyhow?"

"It--it's a joke, Peter," I quavered. He stared at me in speechless

scorn. "Positively it is a joke, Peter."

"I daresay," he said grimly. "Perhaps to-morrow I may see it that way. The question is, will Bill think it's a joke?"

He looked round, and luckily for me he saw all the girls' wraps lying about.

"If the family's here, Clara," he said in a milder voice, "I--I may be doing you an injustice."

Roger had not said a word. He was standing in front of the fire, watching the stairs.

"When we found the note," Peter went on in his awful booming voice, "saying you were going at last to be true to yourself, and when you and Roger had disappeared, what were we to think? Especially after the way you two had fallen into each other's arms from the moment you met."

"How interesting!" said a voice from the staircase.

It was Maisie!

Well, what's the use of going into it again? She gave Roger his ring instantly, and Roger was positively grey. He went back on me without a particle of shame--said I'd suggested the whole thing and begged him to help me; that he'd felt like a fool the whole time.

"Maisie, darling," he said, "surely you know that there's nobody in all the world for me but you."

He held out the ring to her, but she shook her head.

"I'm not angry--not any more," she said. "I've lost my faith in you, that's all. One thing I'm profoundly grateful for--that you and Clara had this--this explosion before we were married and not after."

"Maisie!" he cried.

All at once I remembered Bill's letter, which would positively clear us.

But Peter said Harry Delaney's coat had been stolen from the machine, letter and all! Maisie laughed at that, as if she didn't believe there had been such a letter, and Roger went a shade greyer. All at once it came to me that now Bill would never forgive me. He is so upright, Bill is, and he expects everyone to come up to his standard. And in a way Bill had always had me on a pedestal, and he would never believe that I had been such a fool as to jump off for a lark.

Maisie turned and walked upstairs, leaving the three of us there, Roger holding the ring and staring at it with a perfectly vacant face. At last he turned and went to the door.

"Where are you going, Roger?" I asked helplessly.

"I'm going out to drown myself," he said, and went out.

I shall pass over the rest briefly. Peter took me home in his car. I did not go to mother's. For one thing, the bridge was down. For another, it seemed better for Bill and me to settle things ourselves without family interference.

I went home and went to bed, and all day Monday I watched for Bill. Powell came over and I put on my best negligée and waited, with a water bottle to keep my feet warm and my courage up.

He did not come.

I stayed in bed for three days, and there was not a sign from him. Carrie and Ida telephoned, but only formal messages, and Alice Warrington sent me a box of flowers with her card. But Bill did not come home or call up. I knew he must be staying at the club, and I had terrible hours when I knew he would never forgive me, and then there would be a divorce, and I wanted to die. Roger never gave a sign, but he had not drowned himself.

Wednesday evening came, and no Bill. By that time I knew it was Bill or nobody for me. After those terrible two days at Carrie's, the thought of Bill's ugly, quiet face made me perfectly homesick for him. I didn't care how much he fell asleep in the evening after dinner. That only showed how contented he was. And I tried to imagine being married to

Roger, and seeing him fuss about his ties, and brush the hair over the thin places on top of his head, and I simply couldn't.

It was Wednesday evening when I heard a car come up the drive. I knew at once that it was Bill. I had barely time to turn out all the lights but the pink-shaded one by the bed, and to lay a handkerchief across my eyes, when he came in.

"Well, Clara," he said, standing just inside the door, "I thought we'd better talk this over."

"Bill!" I said, from under the handkerchief.

"I should have come out sooner," he said without moving, "but at first I could not trust myself. I needed a little time."

"Who told you?"

"That doesn't matter, does it? Everybody knows it. But that's not the question. The real issue is between you and me and that--that nincompoop, Waite."

"What has Roger got to do with it?" I looked out from under the handkerchief, and he was livid, positively.

"Bill," I said desperately, "will you come over and sit down on the side of the bed and let me tell you the whole story?"

"I won't be bamboozled, Clara; this is serious. If you've got anything to say, say it. I'll sit here."

He sat down just inside the door on a straight chair and folded his long arms. It was a perfectly hopeless distance.

"Bill!" I said appealingly, and he came over and sat, very uncompromising and stiff, on the side of the bed. I put out my hand, and after a moment's hesitation he took it, but I must say without enthusiasm. I felt like the guiltiest wretch unhung. That's what makes me so perfectly furious now.

"You see, Bill," I said, "it was like this." And I told him the whole thing. About halfway through he dropped my hand.

"It's been an awful lesson, Bill," I ended up. "I'll never say a word again about your enjoying yourself the way you want to. You can swim and play golf and shoot all you like, and--and sleep after dinner, if you'll only forgive me. Bill, suppose I had married Roger Waite!"

He drew a long breath.

"So that was it, old dear!" he said. "Well, all right. We'll put the whole thing in the discard." And he leaned over and put his arms round me.

* * * * *

That ought to be the end of the story. I'd had a lesson and so had some of the others. As Carrie Smith said afterward, to have a good time is one thing, but to be happy is entirely different, and the only way to be happy is to be smug and conventional and virtuous. I never say anything when she starts that line of conversation. But once or twice I've caught her eye, and she has had the grace to look uneasy.

But that's not all. There is more to the story, and now and then I eye Bill, and wonder when he will come and tell me the whole thing. For the other day, in the back of Bill's chiffonier, I came across the letter to him Harry Delaney said he had lost. And Bill had received it Monday morning!

That is not all. Clamped to it was a note from Peter Arundel, and that is why I am writing the whole story, using names and everything. It was a mean trick, and if Bill wants to go to Maisie Brown's wedding he can go. I shall not.

This is Peter's note:

"_Dear Old Man_: Inclosed is the letter Clara gave Delaney to mail, which I read to you last night over the long-distance phone. I'm called away or I'd bring it round.

"It was easy enough for you to say not to let Clara get away with it, but for a time during the storm it looked as if she'd got the bit and was off. Luckily their car got stuck in the creek, and the rest was easy. We saw them, during a flash of lightning, climbing the hill to the Brown place for shelter. Luck was with us after that, for Maisie and a crowd came along, and we told Maisie the story. I take my hat off to Maisie. She's a trump. If you could have seen Roger Waite's face when she gave him back the ring! Carrie, who was looking through the windows with the others, was so sorry for him that she wanted to go in and let him cry on her shoulder.

"I hope Clara didn't take cold. She must have been pretty wet. But you were quite right. It wasn't only that she'd have had the laugh on all of us if she got away with it. As you said, it would be a bad precedent.

"Burn this, for the love of Mike. If Clara sees it she'll go crazy.

"Yours,

"PETER."



A DILL PICKLE

Project Gutenberg's *Bliss, and Other Stories*, by Katherine Mansfield

AND then, after six years, she saw him again. He was seated at one of those little bamboo tables decorated with a Japanese vase of paper daffodils. There was a tall plate of fruit in front of him, and very carefully, in a way she recognized immediately as his "special" way, he was peeling an orange.

He must have felt that shock of recognition in her for he looked up and met her eyes. Incredible! He didn't know her! She smiled; he

frowned. She came towards him. He closed his eyes an instant, but opening them his face lit up as though he had struck a match in a dark room. He laid down the orange and pushed back his chair, and she took her little warm hand out of her muff and gave it to him.

"Vera!" he exclaimed. "How strange. Really, for a moment I didn't know you. Won't you sit down? You've had lunch? Won't you have some coffee?"

She hesitated, but of course she meant to.

"Yes, I'd like some coffee." And she sat down opposite him.

"You've changed. You've changed very much," he said, staring at her with that eager, lighted look. "You look so well. I've never seen you look so well before."

"Really?" She raised her veil and unbuttoned her high fur collar. "I don't feel very well. I can't bear this weather, you know."

"Ah, no. You hate the cold. . . ."

"Loathe it." She shuddered. "And the worst of it is that the older one grows . . ."

He interrupted her. "Excuse me," and tapped on the table for the waitress. "Please bring some coffee and cream." To her: "You are sure you won't eat anything? Some fruit, perhaps. The fruit here is very good."

"No, thanks. Nothing."

"Then that's settled." And smiling just a hint too broadly he took up the orange again. "You were saying--the older one grows----"

"The colder," she laughed. But she was thinking how well she remembered that trick of his--the trick of interrupting her--and of how it used to exasperate her six years ago. She used to feel then as though he, quite suddenly, in the middle of what she was saying, put his hand over her lips, turned from her, attended to something

different, and then took his hand away, and with just the same slightly too broad smile, gave her his attention again. . . . Now we are ready. That is settled.

"The colder!" He echoed her words, laughing too. "Ah, ah. You still say the same things. And there is another thing about you that is not changed at all--your beautiful voice--your beautiful way of speaking." Now he was very grave; he leaned towards her, and she smelled the warm, stinging scent of the orange peel. "You have only to say one word and I would know your voice among all other voices. I don't know what it is--I've often wondered--that makes your voice such a--haunting memory. Do you remember that first afternoon we spent together at Kew Gardens? You were so surprised because I did not know the names of any flowers. I am still just as ignorant for all your telling me. But whenever it is very fine and warm, and I see some bright colours--it's awfully strange--I hear your voice saying: 'Geranium, marigold and verbena.' And I feel those three words are all I recall of some forgotten, heavenly language. . . . You remember that afternoon?"

"Oh, yes, very well." She drew a long, soft breath, as though the paper daffodils between them were almost too sweet to bear. Yet, what had remained in her mind of that particular afternoon was an absurd scene over the tea table. A great many people taking tea in a Chinese pagoda, and he behaving like a maniac about the wasps--waving them away, flapping at them with his straw hat, serious and infuriated out of all proportion to the occasion. How delighted the sniggering tea drinkers had been. And how she had suffered.

But now, as he spoke, that memory faded. His was the truer. Yes, it had been a wonderful afternoon, full of geranium and marigold and verbena, and--warm sunshine. Her thoughts lingered over the last two words as though she sang them.

In the warmth, as it were, another memory unfolded. She saw herself sitting on a lawn. He lay beside her, and suddenly, after a long silence, he rolled over and put his head in her lap.

"I wish," he said, in a low, troubled voice, "I wish that I had taken poison and were about to die--here now!"

At that moment a little girl in a white dress, holding a long, dripping water lily, dodged from behind a bush, stared at them, and dodged back again. But he did not see. She leaned over him.

"Ah, why do you say that? I could not say that."

But he gave a kind of soft moan, and taking her hand he held it to his cheek.

"Because I know I am going to love you too much--far too much. And I shall suffer so terribly. Vera, because you never, never will love me."

He was certainly far better looking now than he had been then. He had lost all that dreamy vagueness and indecision. Now he had the air of a man who has found his place in life, and fills it with a confidence and an assurance which was, to say the least, impressive. He must have made money, too. His clothes were admirable, and at that moment he pulled a Russian cigarette case out of his pocket.

"Won't you smoke?"

"Yes, I will." She hovered over them. "They look very good."

"I think they are. I get them made for me by a little man in St. James's Street. I don't smoke very much. I'm not like you--but when I do, they must be delicious, very fresh cigarettes. Smoking isn't a habit with me; it's a luxury--like perfume. Are you still so fond of perfumes? Ah, when I was in Russia . . ."

She broke in: "You've really been to Russia?"

"Oh, yes. I was there for over a year. Have you forgotten how we used to talk of going there?"

"No, I've not forgotten."

He gave a strange half laugh and leaned back in his chair. "Isn't it curious. I have really carried out all those journeys that we planned.

Yes, I have been to all those places that we talked of, and stayed in them long enough to--as you used to say, 'air oneself' in them. In fact, I have spent the last three years of my life travelling all the time. Spain, Corsica, Siberia, Russia, Egypt. The only country left is China, and I mean to go there, too, when the war is over."

As he spoke, so lightly, tapping the end of his cigarette against the ash-tray, she felt the strange beast that had slumbered so long within her bosom stir, stretch itself, yawn, prick up its ears, and suddenly bound to its feet, and fix its longing, hungry stare upon those far away places. But all she said was, smiling gently: "How I envy you."

He accepted that. "It has been," he said, "very wonderful--especially Russia. Russia was all that we had imagined, and far, far more. I even spent some days on a river boat on the Volga. Do you remember that boatman's song that you used to play?"

"Yes." It began to play in her mind as she spoke.

"Do you ever play it now?"

"No, I've no piano."

He was amazed at that. "But what has become of your beautiful piano?"

She made a little grimace. "Sold. Ages ago."

"But you were so fond of music," he wondered.

"I've no time for it now," said she.

He let it go at that. "That river life," he went on, "is something quite special. After a day or two you cannot realize that you have ever known another. And it is not necessary to know the language--the life of the boat creates a bond between you and the people that's more than sufficient. You eat with them, pass the day with them, and in the evening there is that endless singing."

She shivered, hearing the boatman's song break out again loud and tragic, and seeing the boat floating on the darkening river with

melancholy trees on either side. . . . "Yes, I should like that," said she, stroking her muff.

"You'd like almost everything about Russian life," he said warmly. "It's so informal, so impulsive, so free without question. And then the peasants are so splendid. They are such human beings--yes, that is it. Even the man who drives your carriage has--has some real part in what is happening. I remember the evening a party of us, two friends of mine and the wife of one of them, went for a picnic by the Black Sea. We took supper and champagne and ate and drank on the grass. And while we were eating the coachman came up. 'Have a dill pickle,' he said. He wanted to share with us. That seemed to me so right, so--you know what I mean?"

And she seemed at that moment to be sitting on the grass beside the mysteriously Black Sea, black as velvet, and rippling against the banks in silent, velvet waves. She saw the carriage drawn up to one side of the road, and the little group on the grass, their faces and hands white in the moonlight. She saw the pale dress of the woman outspread and her folded parasol, lying on the grass like a huge pearl crochet hook. Apart from them, with his supper in a cloth on his knees, sat the coachman. "Have a dill pickle," said he, and although she was not certain what a dill pickle was, she saw the greenish glass jar with a red chili like a parrot's beak glimmering through. She sucked in her cheeks; the dill pickle was terribly sour. . . .

"Yes, I know perfectly what you mean," she said.

In the pause that followed they looked at each other. In the past when they had looked at each other like that they had felt such a boundless understanding between them that their souls had, as it were, put their arms round each other and dropped into the same sea, content to be drowned, like mournful lovers. But now, the surprising thing was that it was he who held back. He who said:

"What a marvellous listener you are. When you look at me with those wild eyes I feel that I could tell you things that I would never breathe to another human being."

Was there just a hint of mockery in his voice or was it her fancy? She

could not be sure.

"Before I met you," he said, "I had never spoken of myself to anybody. How well I remember one night, the night that I brought you the little Christmas tree, telling you all about my childhood. And of how I was so miserable that I ran away and lived under a cart in our yard for two days without being discovered. And you listened, and your eyes shone, and I felt that you had even made the little Christmas tree listen too, as in a fairy story."

But of that evening she had remembered a little pot of caviare. It had cost seven and sixpence. He could not get over it. Think of it--a tiny jar like that costing seven and sixpence. While she ate it he watched her, delighted and shocked.

"No, really, that is eating money. You could not get seven shillings into a little pot that size. Only think of the profit they must make. . . ." And he had begun some immensely complicated calculations. . . . But now good-bye to the caviare. The Christmas tree was on the table, and the little boy lay under the cart with his head pillowed on the yard dog.

"The dog was called Bosun," she cried delightedly.

But he did not follow. "Which dog? Had you a dog? I don't remember a dog at all."

"No, no. I mean the yard dog when you were a little boy." He laughed and snapped the cigarette case to.

"Was he? Do you know I had forgotten that. It seems such ages ago. I cannot believe that it is only six years. After I had recognized you to-day--I had to take such a leap--I had to take a leap over my whole life to get back to that time. I was such a kid then." He drummed on the table. "I've often thought how I must have bored you. And now I understand so perfectly why you wrote to me as you did--although at the time that letter nearly finished my life. I found it again the other day, and I couldn't help laughing as I read it. It was so clever--such a true picture of me." He glanced up. "You're not going?"

She had buttoned her collar again and drawn down her veil.

"Yes, I am afraid I must," she said, and managed a smile. Now she knew that he had been mocking.

"Ah, no, please," he pleaded. "Don't go just for a moment," and he caught up one of her gloves from the table and clutched at it as if that would hold her. "I see so few people to talk to nowadays, that I have turned into a sort of barbarian," he said. "Have I said something to hurt you?"

"Not a bit," she lied. But as she watched him draw her glove through his fingers, gently, gently, her anger really did die down, and besides, at the moment he looked more like himself of six years ago.

...

"What I really wanted then," he said softly, "was to be a sort of carpet--to make myself into a sort of carpet for you to walk on so that you need not be hurt by the sharp stones and the mud that you hated so. It was nothing more positive than that--nothing more selfish. Only I did desire, eventually, to turn into a magic carpet and carry you away to all those lands you longed to see."

As he spoke she lifted her head as though she drank something; the strange beast in her bosom began to purr. . . .

"I felt that you were more lonely than anybody else in the world," he went on, "and yet, perhaps, that you were the only person in the world who was really, truly alive. Born out of your time," he murmured, stroking the glove, "fated."

Ah, God! What had she done! How had she dared to throw away her happiness like this. This was the only man who had ever understood her. Was it too late? Could it be too late? _She_ was that glove that he held in his fingers. . . .

"And then the fact that you had no friends and never had made friends with people. How I understood that, for neither had I. Is it just the same now?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Just the same. I am as alone as ever."

"So am I," he laughed gently, "just the same."

Suddenly with a quick gesture he handed her back the glove and scraped his chair on the floor, "But what seemed to me so mysterious then is perfectly plain to me now. And to you, too, of course. . . . It simply was that we were such egoists, so self-engrossed, so wrapped up in ourselves that we hadn't a corner in our hearts for anybody else. Do you know," he cried, naive and hearty, and dreadfully like another side of that old self again, "I began studying a Mind System when I was in Russia, and I found that we were not peculiar at all. It's quite a well known form of . . ."

She had gone. He sat there, thunder-struck, astounded beyond words. . . . And then he asked the waitress for his bill.

"But the cream has not been touched," he said. "Please do not charge me for it."

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THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Amusement Only, by Richard Marsh

(Miss Whitby writes to her Mother.)

MY DEAREST MAMMA,--You will be surprised, and I hope you will be pleased to hear that I am engaged to be married! You are not to smile--it would be cruel--this, really, is serious. Charlie is all that a husband should be--you are not to laugh at that--you know exactly what I mean. I am nearly twenty, and, this time, I feel that my happiness really is at stake. I may not be able to keep my looks for long--some girls lose them when they are quite young--and something seems to tell me that I ought to begin to look life seriously in the face, and become responsible. I almost wish that I had taken to district visiting, like Emma Mortimer--it might have balanced me. Poor Emma! what a pity she is so plain.

Will you mind hinting to Tom Wilson that I think he might be happy

with Nora Cathcart? It is true that I made him promise that he would never speak to her again, but all that is over. I hope you will not think me fickle, dear mamma. I enclose the ring Tom gave me. Will you please give it to him? And point out to him that I am now persuaded that boy and girl attachments never come to anything serious.

By the way, do not forget to tell them to send two pairs of evening shoes. Those which I have are quite worn out. Let both pairs be perfectly plain bronze. Charlie thinks that they make my feet look almost ethereal. Is he not absurd? But I hope that you will not think so, when you come to know him, for he loves your child. You might also ask them to send me a dozen pairs of stockings--nice ones. All mine seem to be in holes. You know I like them as long as you can get them.

I have been here nearly a month, and I have been almost engaged to three different men. How time does seem to fly! Lily says I am a heartless little flirt. I think that perhaps I was, until he came. He has been here just a week, and I seem to have known him years.

Lily seems to be under the impression that I was engaged to Captain Pentland. She is wrong. Captain Pentland has some very noble qualities. He is destined to make some true woman profoundly happy. Of that I have no doubt whatever. But I am not that woman. No, dear mamma, I feel that now. Besides, he wears an eyeglass. As you are aware, I have always had an insuperable objection to an eyeglass. It seems to savour of affectation. And affectation I cannot stand. And then he lisps. As I told you, when I wrote you last, when I sprained my ankle on Highdown Hill, he carried me in his arms for over a mile. Of course, I was grateful. And, between you and me, dear mamma, he held me so very closely to him, that, afterwards I felt as if I ought to marry him. I have explained everything to Charlie. He quite agrees with me that it is absurd for Captain Pentland to think himself ill-used.

While I think of it, when you are in town will you tell them to send me a box of assorted chocolates? You know the kind I like. There is nothing of that sort to be had here, and I do so long for some.

Charlie is Lily's cousin. Do you think that cousins ought to kiss each

other? I wish I could get the opinion of someone on whose judgment I could implicitly rely. At any rate, even supposing that they ought I am quite sure that there should be limits. Before long I am afraid that I shall have to give Charlie a hint that I do not think, under the circumstances, that he ought to kiss Lily quite as much as he does me. She may be his cousin, but she is young, and she is pretty. And cousins are not sisters. It is nonsense for people to pretend they are.

The odd part of it is that if Charlie had not been so fond of kissing Lily I might not be going to marry him now. I knew that he was coming. And I was sitting alone in the drawing-room, in a half-light, with my back to the door, when suddenly someone, putting his arm round my waist, lifting me off my feet, twisted me right round, and began kissing me on my eyes and lips and everywhere.

I thought it was Captain Pentland. Though I was astonished at such behaviour even from him--because it was only that morning we quarrelled. You may judge of my astonishment when I was again able to look out of my own eyes, to find myself being held, as if I were a baby, or a doll, in the arms of a perfect giant of a man, whom I had never seen before. You may imagine how shocked I felt, because, as you know well, my views on such subjects--which I owe to your dear teaching--are, if anything, too severe. I will do him the justice to admit that he seemed to be almost as much shocked as I was.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "ten thousand times. I thought that you were Lily."

He put me down very much as you handle your Chelsea cups, mamma--softly and delicately, as if he had been afraid of chipping pieces off me.

"I suppose you're Charlie?"

I spoke more lightly and more cheerfully than I felt. He seemed so ashamed of himself, and so confused, that I pitied him. You know, dear mamma, that when people know, and feel, that they have done wrong, I always pity them. I cannot help it. It is my nature. All flesh is weak. I myself am prone to err. When Lily did appear, we were talking quite as if we knew each other. And that is how it began. It is odd

how these sort of things sometimes do begin. As you are aware, I speak as one who has had experience. I shall always believe that it was only the breaking of a shoelace which first brought Norman Eliot and me together.

But those chapters in my life are closed. In the days which are past I may have seemed to hesitate, to occasionally have changed my mind. But now my life is linked to Charlie's by bonds which never shall be broken. I feel as if I were already married. The gravity of existence is commencing to weigh upon my mind. A woman when she is nearly twenty is no longer young.

While I remember it, when you send the chocolates don't send any walnuts. I am sick of them. Variously flavoured creams are what I really like. And let two pairs of the stockings be light blue, with bronze stripes high up the leg.

I cannot truly say that Lily is behaving to me quite nicely in my relations with Charlie. I do not wish to wrong her, even in my thoughts--she is the very dearest friend I have!--but, sometimes, I cannot help thinking that she had an eye on Charlie for herself. Because when the other morning I was telling her how strongly I disapproved of cousins marrying, if she had not been Lily--whose single-hearted affection I have every faith in--I should have said that she was positively rude. Charlie only proposed to me last night, yet, although she must have seen what was coming, in the afternoon she was actually talking to me of Norman Eliot--as if I had been to blame! Mr. Eliot and I never really were engaged--some people jump to conclusions without proper justification. And am I compelled to answer a person's letters if, for reasons of my own--quite private reasons--I do not choose to?

She came to my bedroom last night, just as I was going to bed. I told her what Charlie had said, and what I had said. Of course I expected her to congratulate me--as, in circumstances such as mine, a girl's best friend ought to do. She heard me to an end, and she looked at me, and said:

"So you've done it again."

"I don't know about again, dear Lily," I replied. "But it would seem as if I had done it at last. I am feeling so happy that it almost makes me afraid."

"Some girls would feel afraid if they had reason to be conscious of the fact that they had engaged themselves to marry three men at once."

I could not help but notice that a jarring something was in her tone. But I paid no heed to it.

My thoughts were elsewhere.

"How wrong it is," I murmured, "for people to scoff at love. They cannot know what love is--as I do."

"Perhaps not. I should think that what you don't know about love, May, isn't worth knowing." I sighed.

"I fancy, Lily dear, that I have heard stories about you."

"I daresay; but I never snapped up your favourite cousin from under your nose. Possibly you will not mind telling me if you do mean to marry one of them, and, if so, which."

"Lily! How can you ask me such a question? Have I not just been telling you that there is only one man in the world for me, henceforth and for ever, and that his name is Charlie?"

"Exactly. Only last week you told me precisely the same story, and his name was Jim, while about a fortnight ago, it was Norman."

My dearest mamma, you see I am making a clean breast of everything to you. I own, quite candidly, that since I have been here I have not behaved precisely as I might have done, and, indeed, ought to have done. I do not know how it is, I meant to be good; I am sure that nothing could have been better than my resolutions. I had no idea that they could have been so easily broken. It only shows, after all, how fragile we are. I felt that, strange and sad though it seems, Lily was not wholly unjust. I got up from my chair, and I knelt at her feet, and I pillowed my head in her lap and I cried:

"Oh, Lily, I've been so wicked! You can't think how sorry I am, now that it's too late. I wish you'd help me, and tell me what I ought to do."

"I'm a bit of a dab at a cry myself," she said. "So, if you take my advice, to begin with, you'll literally dry up."

Was it not unkind? And was it not vulgar? But I sometimes think that Lily's heart is like the nether millstone--so hard, you know. She went on:

"If you do mean business with Charlie, and you do want my advice, you'll just tell him everything you have been doing, and leave the solution of the situation to him."

I made up my mind there and then that that was exactly what I would do. I resolved that I would have no secrets from my husband--particularly as he would be sure to be told them by unfriendly lips if he did not learn them from mine. Besides, in such matters, a man is so much more generous, and so much more sympathetic than a woman--especially the man. Nor does he value you any the less because he finds that someone else happens to value you a little too.

So, directly Lily had gone I let my hair down, and I put on my light blue dressing-jacket and a touch of powder, and I waited. Presently I heard steps coming along the passage. I opened the door. Sure enough it was Charlie, just going to bed. At sight of me he started. I was conscious that I was, perhaps, acting with some imprudence. But I could not help it. My entire happiness was at stake. You know, dear mamma, that I do look nice in that pretty dressing-jacket, with my hair, not at all untidy, but simply let down. You yourself have told me that, in every sense of the word, I look so young. He held out his hands to me--under a misapprehension. I shrank back.

"Mr. Mason," I began very softly, with, in my voice, a sort of sob, "I could not rest until I had told you all that has passed between us to-night must be considered as unsaid."

He started as if I had struck him. I could see that his face went

white.

"Miss Whitby! May! What do you mean?" He seemed to gasp for breath.

"After all, it is only natural that you should not love a great hulking idiot such as I am."

"You are mistaken. You are not a great hulking idiot. And I do love you. I shall never love anyone but you. It is you who will not love me when you have heard all I have to say."

"What nonsense are you talking?"

Again he held out his arms to me. And again I shrank away.

"It is not nonsense. I wish it were. So far is it from being nonsense that I felt that I could not be at peace until my conscience was unburdened." I paused. I felt the crucial moment was arriving. My voice sank lower. "Someone else was staying here before you came."

"Yes, I know; Lily told me--a man named Pentland."

"Oh, Lily told you so much, did she? Did Lily also tell you that the man named Pentland had bad taste enough to fancy that he had fallen in love with me?"

"Bad taste, you call it. I know nothing about the man, but there, evidently, can be no sort of doubt about his perfect taste."

"But, Charlie--I mean, Mr. Mason."

"You don't--you mean Charlie."

Dear mamma, once more I sighed. I perceived that it would have to be. Some men are so dictatorial.

"The worst of it is that he worried and worried me so--I was staying in the same house, and couldn't get away from him, you see--that he made me almost think I cared for him. But now you have come, and made me see what a mistake it was."

"My little love."

For the third time he held out his arms to me. And, this time, he took me in them. I could not find it in my heart to resist him any longer; it might be the last time he would ever hold me there. I continued my remarks with my head not very far away from his waistcoat. He smoothed my hair, very softly, with his great right hand.

"Unfortunately, I am not at all sure that Captain Pentland does not think that, in a sort of way, I am engaged to him. Oh, Charlie, whatever shall I do?"

"Tell him the truth. Say that you're sorry for him, poor chap, but even the best regulated girls will make mistakes. I'm the mistake you've made."

I was silent. Then I whispered:

"Will you forgive me?"

"It strikes me that it is I who ought to ask you to forgive me--for not having been the first to come upon the scene."

This was throwing a new light upon the subject. It had not occurred to me to look at it from that point of view before. But I had not come to the end of my confessions. Dear mamma, how careful we women ought to be! It is these crises in our lives which make us feel what short-sighted mortals we actually are.

"Before Captain Pentland came"--I was pulling at one of the buttons on his waistcoat as I spoke, and I realised what a big heart Charlie's must be, if it was at all in proportion to his chest--"another friend of Lily's was stopping in the house."

"Ye-es."

I could not help but be conscious of a certain hesitation in his pronunciation of the word.

"His name was Eliot."

"Well?"

There had been a moment's silence before he spoke. And, when he had spoken, there ensued a portentous pause. I hid my face still more from his examining gaze. My voice seemed almost to die away.

"He, also, professed to bestow on me the gift of his affection."

"The devil he did!"

Yes, mamma, that was precisely what he said. It made me shiver. But he was sorry as soon as the words had passed his lips.

"Forgive me! I didn't mean it! After all, it is only to be expected that every man who sees you will fall in love with you at sight."

I wondered if he would talk to me like that in years to come. Do husbands of ten years' standing say such things unto their wives? Oh, how ashamed of myself I felt as I thought of what I still had to admit! Dear mamma, I will try hard never again to do what my conscience tells me is not right. If only we would always listen to the still small voice which seeks to guide us!

"Charlie, you have no notion how foolish I have been! Until you came I had no proper conception of the actualities of existence. Mr. Eliot caused me to confuse the issues just as Captain Pentland did."

He held me out a little way in front of him, trying to look into my face. I was careful not to let him see too much of it. I hung down my head with what, I do hope, mamma, was proper penitence.

"Let me know, clearly, where we are, little girl. Am I to understand you to say that both these men asked you to marry them?"

"I am afraid, Charlie, that you are to understand something of the kind."

"And that you gave both of them encouragement?"

I looked up at him--such a look, mamma! My eyes were swimming in tears. I knew he would not tell me to "dry up." My heart seemed to be rising to my lips.

"Not real encouragement. I never gave anyone real encouragement, Charlie, till I knew you. Even in your case I fear I ought to have been more reticent. But you cannot have the least idea of what a wide world of love you seem to have opened out to me. Won't you forgive me for encouraging you?"

Dear mamma, he collapsed. Of what took place during the moments which immediately followed. I can give you no definite description. I know I began to think that the end of the world had come. When he had quite finished, he said:

"Look here, young lady, what is past is past. We will make no further allusions to what took place before the war. But, in the future, perhaps you will kindly manage not, as you put it, to confuse the issues, but will continue to confine yourself to encouraging me."

Was it not noble of him? And so sweet! I am persuaded that his character is one of singular beauty.

Dear mamma, the passages which ensued were too sacred even for your dear eyes. When he left me I felt certain it was to dream of him. I know that, all night long, I dreamt of him. And, on my knees, beside my bed, I registered a vow that, in the time to come, I will be as good as I possibly can.

Do not forget the shoes, and the stockings, and the chocolates! And do give Tom his ring! I am registering this letter, so you are sure to get it safe.

I will bring, or send, Charlie to you, on approval, whenever you please.

I am, my dearest mamma,

Your ever loving daughter,

MAY.



YELLOW HANDKERCHIEF

Project Gutenberg's *Brown Wolf and Other Jack London Stories*

"I'm not wanting to dictate to you, lad," Charley said, "but I'm very much against your making a last raid. You've gone safely through rough times with rough men, and it would be a shame to have something happen to you at the very end."

"But how can I get out of making a last raid?" I demanded, with the cocksureness of youth. "There always has to be a last, you know, to anything."

Charley crossed his legs, leaned back, and considered the problem. "Very true. But why not call the capture of Demetrios Contos the last? You're back from it safe and sound and hearty, for all your good wetting, and--and----" His voice broke and he could not speak for a moment. "And I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you now."

I laughed at Charley's fears while I gave in to the claims of his affection, and agreed to consider the last raid already performed. We had been together for two years, and now I was leaving the fish patrol in order to go back and finish my education. I had earned and saved money to put me through three years at the high school, and though the beginning of the term was several months away, I intended doing a lot of studying for the entrance examinations.

My belongings were packed snugly in a sea-chest, and I was all ready to buy my ticket and ride down on the train to Oakland, when Neil Partington arrived in Benicia. The *Reindeer* was needed immediately for work far down on the Lower Bay, and Neil said he intended to run straight for Oakland. As that was his home and as I was to live with his family while going to school, he saw no reason, he said, why I should not put my chest aboard and come along.

So the chest went aboard, and in the middle of the afternoon we hoisted the _Reindeer's_ big mainsail and cast off. It was tantalizing fall weather. The sea-breeze, which had blown steadily all summer, was gone, and in its place were capricious winds and murky skies which made the time of arriving anywhere extremely problematical. We started on the first of the ebb, and as we slipped down the Carquinez Straits, I looked my last for some time upon Benicia and the bight at Turner's Shipyard, where we had besieged the _Lancashire Queen_, and had captured Big Alec, the King of the Greeks. And at the mouth of the Straits I looked with not a little interest upon the spot where a few days before I should have drowned but for the good that was in the nature of Demetrios Contos.

A great wall of fog advanced across San Pablo Bay to meet us, and in a few minutes the _Reindeer_ was running blindly through the damp obscurity. Charley, who was steering, seemed to have an instinct for that kind of work. How he did it, he himself confessed that he did not know; but he had a way of calculating winds, currents, distance, time, drift, and sailing speed that was truly marvellous.

"It looks as though it were lifting," Neil Partington said, a couple of hours after we had entered the fog. "Where do you say we are, Charley?"

Charley looked at his watch. "Six o'clock, and three hours more of ebb," he remarked casually.

"But where do you say we are!" Neil insisted.

Charley pondered a moment, and then answered, "The tide has edged us over a bit out of our course, but if the fog lifts right now, as it is going to lift, you'll find we're not more than a thousand miles off McNear's Landing."

"You might be a little more definite by a few miles, anyway," Neil grumbled, showing by his tone that he disagreed.

"All right, then," Charley said, conclusively, "not less than a quarter of a mile, nor more than a half."

The wind freshened with a couple of little puffs, and the fog thinned perceptibly.

"McNear's is right off there," Charley said, pointing directly into the fog on our weather beam.

The three of us were peering intently in that direction, when the _Reindeer_ struck with a dull crash and came to a standstill. We ran forward, and found her bowsprit entangled in the tanned rigging of a short, chunky mast. She had collided, head on, with a Chinese junk lying at anchor.

At the moment we arrived forward, five Chinese, like so many bees, came swarming out of the little 'tween-decks cabin, the sleep still in their eyes.

Leading them came a big, muscular man, conspicuous for his pock-marked face and the yellow silk handkerchief swathed about his head. It was Yellow Handkerchief, the Chinaman whom we had arrested for illegal shrimp-fishing the year before, and who, at that time, had nearly sunk the _Reindeer_, as he had nearly sunk it now by violating the rules of navigation.

"What d'ye mean, you yellow-faced heathen, lying here in a fairway without a horn a-going?" Charley cried hotly.

"Mean?" Neil calmly answered. "Just take a look--that's what he means."

Our eyes followed the direction indicated by Neil's finger, and we saw the open amidships of the junk, half filled, as we found on closer examination, with fresh-caught shrimps. Mingled with the shrimps were myriads of small fish, from a quarter of an inch upward in size. Yellow Handkerchief had lifted the trap-net at high-water slack, and, taking advantage of the concealment offered by the fog, had boldly been lying by, waiting to lift the net again at low-water slack.

"Well," Neil hummed and hawed, "in all my varied and extensive experience as a fish patrolman, I must say this is the easiest capture I ever made. What'll we do with them, Charley?"

"Tow the junk into San Rafael, of course," came the answer. Charley turned to me. "You stand by the junk, lad, and I'll pass you a towing line. If the wind doesn't fail us, we'll make the creek before the tide gets too low, sleep at San Rafael, and arrive in Oakland to-morrow by midday."

So saying, Charley and Neil returned to the Reindeer and got under way, the junk towing astern. I went aft and took charge of the prize, steering by means of an antiquated tiller and a rudder with large, diamond-shaped holes, through which the water rushed back and forth.

By now the last of the fog had vanished, and Charley's estimate of our position was confirmed by the sight of McNear's Landing a short half-mile away, following: along the west shore, we rounded Point Pedro in plain view of the Chinese shrimp villages, and a great to-do was raised when they saw one of their junks towing behind the familiar fish patrol sloop.

The wind, coming off the land, was rather puffy and uncertain, and it would have been more to our advantage had it been stronger. San Rafael Creek, up which we had to go to reach the town and turn over our prisoners to the authorities, ran through wide-stretching marshes, and was difficult to navigate on a falling tide, while at low tide it was impossible to navigate at all. So, with the tide already half-ebbed, it was necessary for us to make time. This the heavy junk prevented, lumbering along behind and holding the Reindeer back by just so much dead weight.

"Tell those coolies to get up that sail," Charley finally called to me. "We don't want to hang up on the mud flats for the rest of the night."

I repeated the order to Yellow Handkerchief, who mumbled it huskily to his men. He was suffering from a bad cold, which doubled him up in convulsive coughing spells and made his eyes heavy and bloodshot. This made him more evil-looking than ever, and when he glared viciously at me I remembered with a shiver the close shave I had had with him at the time of his previous arrest.

His crew sullenly tailed on to the halyards, and the strange, outlandish sail, lateen in rig and dyed a warm brown, rose in the air. We were

sailing on the wind, and when Yellow Handkerchief flattened down the sheet the junk forged ahead and the tow-line went slack. Fast as the _Reindeer_ could sail, the junk outsailed her; and to avoid running her down I hauled a little closer on the wind. But the junk likewise outpointed, and in a couple of minutes I was abreast of the _Reindeer_ and to windward. The tow-line had now tautened, at right angles to the two boats, and the predicament was laughable.

"Cast off!" I shouted.

Charley hesitated.

"It's all right," I added. "Nothing can happen. We'll make the creek on this tack, and you'll be right behind me all the way up to San Rafael."

At this Charley cast off, and Yellow Handkerchief sent one of his men forward to haul in the line. In the gathering darkness I could just make out the mouth of San Rafael Creek, and by the time we entered it I could barely see its banks. The _Reindeer_ was fully five minutes astern, and we continued to leave her astern as we beat up the narrow, winding channel. With Charley behind us, it seemed I had little to fear from my five prisoners; but the darkness prevented my keeping a sharp eye on them, so I transferred my revolver from my trousers pocket to the side pocket of my coat, where I could more quickly put my hand on it.

Yellow Handkerchief was the one I feared, and that he knew it and made use of it, subsequent events will show. He was sitting a few feet away from me, on what then happened to be the weather side of the junk. I could scarcely see the outlines of his form, but I soon became convinced that he was slowly, very slowly, edging closer to me. I watched him carefully. Steering with my left hand, I slipped my right into my pocket and got hold of the revolver.

I saw him shift along for a couple of inches, and I was just about to order him back--the words were trembling on the tip of my tongue--when I was struck with great force by a heavy figure that had leaped through the air upon me from the lee side. It was one of the crew. He pinioned my right arm so that I could not withdraw my hand from my pocket, and at the same time clapped his other hand over my mouth. Of course, I could have struggled away from him and freed my hand or gotten my mouth clear

so that I might cry an alarm, but in a trice Yellow Handkerchief was on top of me.

I struggled around to no purpose in the bottom of the junk, while my legs and arms were tied and my mouth securely bound in what I afterward found to be a cotton shirt. Then I was left lying in the bottom. Yellow Handkerchief took the tiller, issuing his orders in whispers; and from our position at the time, and from the alteration of the sail, which I could dimly make out above me as a blot against the stars, I knew the junk was being headed into the mouth of a small slough which emptied at that point into San Rafael Creek.

In a couple of minutes we ran softly alongside the bank, and the sail was silently lowered. The Chinese kept very quiet. Yellow Handkerchief sat down in the bottom alongside of me, and I could feel him straining to repress his raspy, hacking cough. Possibly seven or eight minutes later I heard Charley's voice as the Reindeer went past the mouth of the slough.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am," I could plainly hear him saying to Neil, "that the lad has finished with the fish patrol without accident."

Here Neil said something which I could not catch, and then Charley's voice went on:

"The youngster takes naturally to the water, and if when he finishes high school he takes a course in navigation and goes deep sea, I see no reason why he shouldn't rise to be master of the finest and biggest ship afloat."

It was all very flattering to me, but lying there, bound and gagged by my own prisoners, with the voices growing faint and fainter as the Reindeer slipped on through the darkness toward San Rafael, I must say I was not in quite the proper situation to enjoy my smiling future. With the Reindeer went my last hope. What was to happen next I could not imagine, for the Chinese were a different race from mine and from what I knew I was confident that fair play was no part of their make-up.

After waiting a few minutes longer, the crew hoisted the lateen sail, and Yellow Handkerchief steered down toward the mouth of San Rafael

Creek. The tide was getting lower, and he had difficulty in escaping the mud-banks. I was hoping he would run aground, but he succeeded in making the bay without accident.

As we passed out of the creek a noisy discussion arose, which I knew related to me. Yellow Handkerchief was vehement, but the other four as vehemently opposed him. It was very evident that he advocated doing away with me and that they were afraid of the consequences. I was familiar enough with the Chinese character to know that fear alone restrained them. But what plan they offered in place of Yellow Handkerchief's murderous one, I could not make out.

My feelings, as my fate hung in the balance, may be guessed. The discussion developed into a quarrel, in the midst of which Yellow Handkerchief unshipped the heavy tiller and sprang toward me. But his four companions threw themselves between, and a clumsy struggle took place for possession of the tiller. In the end Yellow Handkerchief was overcome, and sullenly returned to the steering, while they soundly berated him for his rashness.

Not long after, the sail was run down and the junk slowly urged forward by means of the sweeps. I felt it ground gently on the soft mud. Three of the Chinese--they all wore long sea-boots--got over the side, and the other two passed me across the rail. With Yellow Handkerchief at my legs and his two companions at my shoulders, they began to flounder along through the mud. After some time their feet struck firmer footing, and I knew they were carrying me up some beach. The location of this beach was not doubtful in my mind. It could be none other than one of the Marin Islands, a group of rocky islets which lay off the Marin County shore.

When they reached the firm sand that marked high tide, I was dropped, and none too gently. Yellow Handkerchief kicked me spitefully in the ribs, and then the trio floundered back through the mud to the junk. A moment later I heard the sail go up and slat in the wind as they drew in the sheet. Then silence fell, and I was left to my own devices for getting free.

I remembered having seen tricksters writhe and squirm out of ropes with which they were bound, but though I writhed and squirmed like a good fellow, the knots remained as hard as ever, and there was no appreciable

slack. In the course of my squirming, however, I rolled over upon a heap of clam-shells--the remains, evidently, of some yachting party's clam-bake. This gave me an idea. My hands were tied behind my back; and, clutching a shell in them, I rolled over and over, up the beach, till I came to the rocks I knew to be there.

Rolling around and searching, I finally discovered a narrow crevice, into which I shoved the shell. The edge of it was sharp, and across the sharp edge I proceeded to saw the rope that bound my wrists. The edge of the shell was also brittle, and I broke it by bearing too heavily upon it. Then I rolled back to the heap and returned with as many shells as I could carry in both hands. I broke many shells, cut my hands a number of times, and got cramps in my legs from my strained position and my exertions.

While I was suffering from the cramps, and resting, I heard a familiar halloo drift across the water. It was Charley, searching for me. The gag in my mouth prevented me from replying, and I could only lie there, helplessly fuming, while he rowed past the island and his voice slowly lost itself in the distance.

I returned to the sawing process, and at the end of half an hour succeeded in severing the rope. The rest was easy. My hands once free, it was a matter of minutes to loosen my legs and to take the gag out of my mouth. I ran around the island to make sure it was an island and not by any chance a portion of the mainland. An island it certainly was, one of the Marin group, fringed with a sandy beach and surrounded by a sea of mud. Nothing remained but to wait till daylight and to keep warm; for it was a cold, raw night for California, with just enough wind to pierce the skin and cause one to shiver.

To keep up the circulation, I ran around the island a dozen times or so, and clambered across its rocky backbone as many times more--all of which was of greater service to me, as I afterward discovered, than merely to warm me up. In the midst of this exercise I wondered if I had lost anything out of my pockets while rolling over and over in the sand. A search showed the absence of my revolver and pocket-knife. The first Yellow Handkerchief had taken; but the knife had been lost in the sand.

I was hunting for it when the sound of rowlocks came to my ears. At

first, of course, I thought of Charley; but on second thought I knew Charley would be calling out as he rowed along. A sudden premonition of danger seized me. The Marin Islands are lonely places; chance visitors in the dead of night are hardly to be expected. What if it were Yellow Handkerchief? The sound made by the rowlocks grew more distinct. I crouched in the sand and listened intently. The boat, which I judged a small skiff from the quick stroke of the oars, was landing in the mud about fifty yards up the beach. I heard a raspy, hacking cough, and my heart stood still. It was Yellow Handkerchief. Not to be robbed of his revenge by his more cautious companions, he had stolen away from the village and come back alone.

I did some swift thinking. I was unarmed and helpless on a tiny islet, and a yellow barbarian, whom I had reason to fear, was coming after me. Any place was safer than the island, and I turned instinctively to the water, or rather to the mud. As he began to flounder ashore through the mud, I started to flounder out into it, going over the same course which the Chinese had taken in landing me and in returning to the junk.

Yellow Handkerchief, believing me to be lying tightly bound, exercised no care, but came ashore noisily. This helped me, for, under the shield of his noise and making no more of myself than necessary, I managed to cover fifty feet by the time he had made the beach. Here I lay down in the mud. It was cold and clammy, and made me shiver, but I did not care to stand up and run the risk of being discovered by his sharp eyes.

He walked down the beach straight to where he had left me lying, and I had a fleeting feeling of regret at not being able to see his surprise when he did not find me. But it was a very fleeting regret, for my teeth were chattering with the cold.

What his movements were after that I had largely to deduce from the facts of the situation, for I could scarcely see him in the dim starlight. But I was sure that the first thing he did was to make the circuit of the beach to learn if landings had been made by other boats. This he would have known at once by the tracks through the mud.

Convinced that no boat had removed me from the island, he next started to find out what had become of me. Beginning at the pile of clam-shells, he lighted matches to trace my tracks in the sand. At such times I could

see his villainous face plainly, and, when the sulphur from the matches irritated his lungs, between the raspy cough that followed and the clammy mud in which I was lying, I confess I shivered harder than ever.

The multiplicity of my footprints puzzled him. Then the idea that I might be out in the mud must have struck him, for he waded out a few yards in my direction, and, stooping, with his eyes searched the dim surface long and carefully. He could not have been more than fifteen feet from me, and had he lighted a match he would surely have discovered me.

He returned to the beach and clambered about over the rocky backbone, again hunting for me with lighted matches. The closeness of the shave impelled me to further flight. Not daring to wade upright, on account of the noise made by floundering and by the suck of the mud, I remained lying down in the mud and propelled myself over its surface by means of my hands. Still keeping the trail made by the Chinese in going from and to the junk, I held on until I reached the water. Into this I waded to a depth of three feet, and then I turned off to the side on a line parallel with the beach.

The thought came to me of going toward Yellow Handkerchief's skiff and escaping in it, but at that very moment he returned to the beach, and, as though fearing the very thing I had in mind, he slushed out through the mud to assure himself that the skiff was safe. This turned me in the opposite direction. Half swimming, half wading, with my head just out of water and avoiding splashing, I succeeded in putting about a hundred feet between myself and the spot where the Chinese had begun to wade ashore from the junk. I drew myself out on the mud and remained lying flat.

Again Yellow Handkerchief returned to the beach and made a search of the island, and again he returned to the heap of clam-shells. I knew what was running in his mind as well as he did himself. No one could leave or land without making tracks in the mud. The only tracks to be seen were those leading from his skiff and from where the junk had been. I was not on the island. I must have left it by one or the other of those two tracks. He had just been over the one to his skiff, and was certain I had not left that way. Therefore I could have left the island only by going over the tracks of the junk landing. This he proceeded to

verify by wading out over them himself, lighting matches as he came along.

When he arrived at the point where I had first lain, I knew, by the matches he burned and the time he took, that he had discovered the marks left by my body. These he followed straight to the water and into it, but in three feet of water he could no longer see them. On the other hand, as the tide was still falling, he could easily make out the impression made by the junk's bow, and could have likewise made out the impression of any other boat if it had landed at that particular spot. But there was no such mark; and I knew that he was absolutely convinced that I was hiding somewhere in the mud.

But to hunt on a dark night for a boy in a sea of mud would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack, and he did not attempt it. Instead he went back to the beach and prowled around for some time. I was hoping he would give me up and go, for by this time I was suffering severely from the cold. At last he waded out to his skiff and rowed away. What if this departure of Yellow Handkerchief's were a sham? What if he had done it merely to entice me ashore?

The more I thought of it the more certain I became that he had made a little too much noise with his oars as he rowed away. So I remained, lying in the mud and shivering. I shivered till the muscles of the small of my back ached and pained me as badly as the cold, and I had need of all my self-control to force myself to remain in my miserable situation.

It was well that I did, however, for, possibly an hour later, I thought I could make out something moving on the beach. I watched intently, but my ears were rewarded first, by a raspy cough I knew only too well. Yellow Handkerchief had sneaked back, landed on the other side of the island, and crept around to surprise me if I had returned.

After that, though hours passed without sign of him, I was afraid to return to the island at all. On the other hand, I was almost equally afraid that I should die of the exposure I was undergoing. I had never dreamed one could suffer so. I grew so cold and numb, finally, that I ceased to shiver. But my muscles and bones began to ache in a way that was agony. The tide had long since begun to rise and, foot by foot, it drove me in toward the beach. High water came at three o'clock, and at

three o'clock I drew myself up on the beach, more dead than alive, and too helpless to have offered any resistance had Yellow Handkerchief swooped down upon me.

But no Yellow Handkerchief appeared. He had given me up and gone back to Point Pedro. Nevertheless, I was in a deplorable, not to say a dangerous, condition. I could not stand upon my feet, much less walk. My clammy, muddy garments clung to me like sheets of ice. I thought I should never get them off. So numb and lifeless were my fingers, and so weak was I that it seemed to take an hour to get off my shoes. I had not the strength to break the porpoise-hide laces, and the knots defied me. I repeatedly beat my hands upon the rocks to get some sort of life into them. Sometimes I felt sure I was going to die.

But in the end,--after several centuries, it seemed to me,--I got off the last of my clothes. The water was now close at hand, and I crawled painfully into it and washed the mud from my naked body. Still, I could not get on my feet and walk and I was afraid to lie still. Nothing remained but to crawl weakly, like a snail, and at the cost of constant pain, up and down the sand. I kept this up as long as possible, but as the east paled with the coming of dawn I began to succumb. The sky grew rosy-red, and the golden rim of the sun, showing above the horizon, found me lying helpless and motionless among the clam-shells.

As in a dream, I saw the familiar mainsail of the Reindeer as she slipped out of San Rafael Creek on a light puff of morning air. This dream was very much broken. There are intervals I can never recollect on looking back over it. Three things, however, I distinctly remember: the first sight of the Reindeer's mainsail; her lying at anchor a few hundred feet away and a small boat leaving her side; and the cabin stove roaring red-hot, myself swathed all over with blankets, except on the chest and shoulders, which Charley was pounding and mauling unmercifully, and my mouth and throat burning with the coffee which Neil Partington was pouring down a trifle too hot.

But burn or no burn, I tell you it felt good. By the time we arrived in Oakland I was as limber and strong as ever,--though Charley and Neil Partington were afraid I was going to have pneumonia, and Mrs. Partington, for my first six months of school, kept an anxious eye upon me to discover the first symptoms of consumption.

Time flies. It seems but yesterday that I was a lad of sixteen on the fish patrol. Yet I know that I arrived this very morning from China, with a quick passage to my credit, and master of the barkentine _Harvester_. And I know that to-morrow morning I shall run over to Oakland to see Neil Partington and his wife and family, and later on up to Benicia to see Charley Le Grant and talk over old times. No; I shall not go to Benicia, now that I think about it. I expect to be a highly interested party to a wedding, shortly to take place. Her name is Alice Partington, and, since Charley has promised to be best man, he will have to come down to Oakland instead.



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